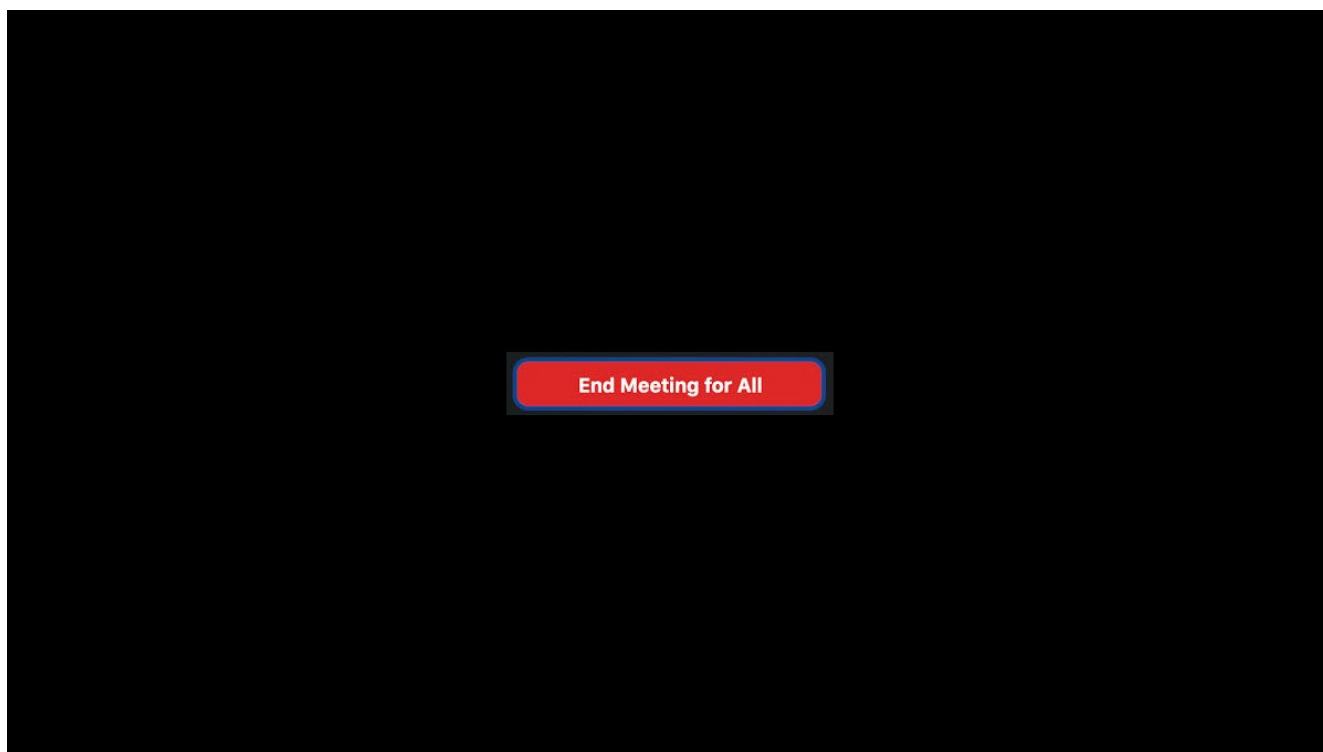


Procreative ethics and extinction | part 2



We can make out the darkness at the end of the well-lit tunnel.

– Bianco Luno
leçons en ténèbres, publication forthcoming.

This is the second of a two part series on procreation ethics. Please check the first part, “[Antinatalism v. pronatalism: is depopulation good or bad?](#)” for context. At the end of part 1, we touched, but didn’t sufficiently elaborate, on Seana Shiffrin’s case for the *morally problematic* nature of procreation and Asheel Singh’s harnessing of Shiffrin’s concerns to press an explicit *antinatalist* thesis. We pick up there in our discussion of the philosophical antinatalism/pronatalism debate and move on to consider what kind of *extinction* would become a *semi-conscious* species such as ours...

After discussing the Shiffrin/Singh case for – at least – wariness around procreation, we consider an important criticism of the debate from Nicholas Smyth, and respond to it. Finally, we examine why we think human extinction is a foregone conclusion. One way or another humans, as we know them,¹ will disappear, and, likely, sooner than later.² Moreover, if we survive long enough, there are reasons to believe we may enjoy the luxury of making a *conscious* choice to exit. There remains the question whether and why this will be a good or a bad thing.

1. Does survival in radically revised form as, for example, suggested by transhumanism, count?
2. Gracefully? That is *the* question from my perspective.

This topic is probably the most deeply rooted and widely ramified of any I have done. If philosophy is about ultimate questions, nothing can be more ultimate than the concerns that arise in contemplating collective death. The proverbial “meaning of life” question is at stake. The point, if any, of our existence is in the balance. Many shy away from thoughts like these. It’s not hard to understand why. Some pretend there is nothing to be said. Some refer to religion. Some to science. Most keep busy with distractions.

I contend there are a few things to say. Logically, we can describe what is possible. Morally, we can express preferences. That’s not nothing.

Shiffrin’s equivocal view of procreation

Or when it’s okay to presume permission without asking...

[Seana Shiffrin](#), in her groundbreaking 1999 paper “[Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm](#)”³ expresses a qualm with the permissibility of bringing new life into the world. Though she never quite settles on an antinatalist conclusion, she draws attention to the *morally problematic* nature of procreation viewed from a non-consequentialist perspective and articulates a principle that is, I think, at the core of one important strain of antinatalism: at least at this time, in our culture, it is not permissible to make decisions of a *nontrivial* nature on behalf of others without their consent or endorsement. Surely, the decision to bring into existence another being qualifies as having such gravity. But the unborn cannot be consulted on a decision to confer existence on them. Coming into existence implies exposure to harm – even in the unlikely case where a *long uninterrupted happy* life with no harm but the cessation of existence at its conclusion is ever in the cards for the created subject of experience...⁴

At the heart of the principle is an asymmetry, which Shiffrin was one of the first to note, between harms and benefits: the widespread moral intuition that harms and benefits are *not* interchangeable.⁵ This differential assessment is a fact of our nature, and is why consent matters in nontrivial decisions. For illustration, I cannot *steal* your car, return it the next day, repaired, repainted, cleaned, detailed...etc. and expect thereby to have *undone* the harm I did you in stealing it in the first place. Not even if I replaced your car with a brand new model in everyway an improvement over the one I stole from you. It may be that you benefited materially from my actions but this does *not* undo the wrong. Essentially, this is a *moral* wrong I did you, and, in the typical case, a *legal* wrong as well. My post-theft behavior

3. “[Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm](#),” Seana Shiffrin, *Legal Theory*, June 1999.

4. The harm of cessation – death – *after* a happy life we may think of as more acute *precisely because of its out-sized share of happiness*. *The happier the life, the greater its loss*, we might think. For this not to be the case, some mechanism of attitudinal change must be at work between birth and death. A side effect must be posited or noted: that at the end of a long happy life one will, if not welcome, at least feel readied, for respite. This would rob death of its sting, as the period of quiescence following orgasm. The respite may not have been what motivated, or was so great about having the experience in the first place, but it can be a relief, a release, a postcoital excuse from exhausting desire. The concept of “*la petite mort*” is appropriately so-termed.

5. Shiffrin introduced the asymmetry inherent in the moral priority of avoiding harms over conferring benefits in her 1993 dissertation. Benatar arrived at it independently. Despite Benatar’s demurral on the label as applying to him, his case takes “negative utilitarian” form. But Shiffrin’s account hints at *why* the asymmetry exists, not just *that* it does. It appears rooted in deontological considerations around respecting rational autonomy. Since we deem deontological intuitions [more explanatory](#) than consequential ones, Shiffrin’s account of the asymmetry is more enlightening than Benatar’s. See especially the “well-meaning” rapist case discussed below and more extensively in Appendix 3 for an exploration of this crucial point.

gives you an opportunity to enjoy the benefit, unsolicited though it might be. You *may* choose to accept the result but you are under no obligation to do so. My behavior may offer the legal system an excuse to go easy on me, to mitigate the damages I am liable for, but it will not absolve me: I will – *and ought* – be criminally prosecuted anyway. And this would not be just because society has an interest in discouraging such behavior – stealing, that is typically harm inducing, even if not in this particular instance – but *also* because behind the intuition that what I did was punishable is an understanding that, as Shiffrin puts it:

...harm involves conditions that generate a significant chasm or conflict between one's will and one's experience, one's life more broadly understood, or one's circumstances. Although harms differ from one another in various ways, all have in common that they render agents or a significant or close aspect of their lived experience like that of an *endurer* as opposed to that of an active agent, genuinely engaged with her circumstances, who selects, or endorses and identifies with, the main components of her life. Typically, harm involves the imposition of a state or condition that directly or indirectly obstructs, prevents, frustrates, or undoes an agent's cognizant interaction with her circumstances and her efforts to [124] fashion a life within them that is *distinctively and authentically hers*—as more than merely that which must be watched, marked, endured or undergone. To be harmed primarily involves the imposition of conditions from which the person undergoing them is reasonably alienated or which are strongly at odds with the conditions she would rationally will; also, harmed states may be ones that preclude her from removing herself from or averting such conditions.

Benefits, in contrast, are a relative gratuity:

The central cases of *pure* benefits involve the enhancement of one's situation or condition, or the fulfillment of nonessential, but [125] perhaps important, interests. Such enhancement and fulfillment go beyond merely securing the minima that make one's life more than tolerable and susceptible to active identification. The list of goods mentioned earlier (material enhancement, sensual pleasure, goal-fulfillment, nonessential knowledge, competitive advantage) seems roughly right. Those items all involve goods, but the absence of them would not create *the stark cleavage* between one's will and one's experience, life, or circumstances that I suggest characterizes harm.

Six units of benefit is *not* compensation for a half-dozen of harm. It's not clear that *any* amount of benefit can compensate for *nontrivial* harm. May a rapist offer his victim money in return for *moral* forgiveness? It is one thing to *settle* for compensation. It is another to make it so that the wrong never happened.

Even if I returned your car improved or offered you a new one, the situation remains one that you did not ask to be placed in; you were not consulted. I made you a *passive endurer* of a situation created by me. What is good for you was *presumed* by me. The wrongness consists in my affront to your rational agency and presumption (assuming the presumption was not a trivial one as in a case where I pick up litter on the sidewalk in front of your yard, *presuming* you would appreciate it *and* discounting the remote possibility that *for you* it was not litter but an art installation).

Contrast the theft case with the situation where you are in a serious car accident, unconscious, and your car is on fire. I happen along and pull you out of the burning car – and, in the process, I *risked and/or*

did break your arm. I benefited you. I saved your life. I *also* caused you harm. But the harm, or risk⁶ of it, that I caused was, under the circumstances, necessary to save you from the *greater* harm of death, which, I presumed, is what you, and most rational persons, would have wanted to avoid in the circumstance. But, I didn't ask you *first*. Perhaps I couldn't. You were not conscious. This case is less morally/legally problematic, Shiffrin contends, because of the *much greater harm* I saved you from while causing you the harm I did... On the other hand, my theft and post-theft attempt at melioration did not save you from any greater harm that you, or a reasonable person, could perceive impending. In both cases, you did not explicitly endorse what I did but you benefited.

In the rescue case, the fact that you were overall benefited does not mean the broken arm sustained in the rescue was not a harm. *Benefits do not cancel out harms, or the reverse*, as the comparative account⁷ Shiffrin argues against would suggest; harms and benefits may inhere in one and the same act and the ultimate measure of wrongness is not a "net" result. It is, rather, whether the autonomous engagement of the rescuee or the benefited was solicited and involved. In the rescue case, my presumption, as rescuer, was reasonable. (Though similar acts may not always be: you may have wrecked your car, intending suicide, for instance. But, barring information to the contrary, I can be reasonably excused for believing you, the rescued, were *not* suicidal.)

Thus, whether or not causing a lesser harm to prevent a greater one is justified is contingent on *how reasonable the presumption* is that the target of my action would have endorsed what I did. In the car theft case, I cannot presume so carelessly. The car, as is, may have had deep sentimental value for you or the interruption in your access to your own transportation may have cost you. It is far from obvious that I was saving you from a greater harm by stealing your car. And if my intent was, all along, to benefit you, then, *if* I did benefit you, I did it by turning you into a passive endurer of my actions. Quite apart from consequential harm, if any, this is wrong barring some clear sign of actual, or reasonably inferred, endorsement from you.

Although the dominant perspective **[that harms and benefits are fungible]** has an intuitive familiarity and plausibility, **I believe it is mistaken. I suggest a different moral perspective toward routine procreation, what I will call the "equivocal view."** The view regards procreation as an intrinsically and not just epistemically a morally hard case. For it is not a morally straightforward activity, but one that ineliminably involves serious moral hazards. Although there is much to be said for it, it faces difficult justificatory hurdles because it involves imposing serious harms and risks on someone who is not in danger of suffering greater harm if one does not act.

6. *Placing persons at risk*, even when no material harm results, is commonly deemed a harm of a special sort. Consider a two-year old playing in its parents bedroom where a loaded pistol is kept in a bottom drawer. Suppose the child *never* opens the drawer and no tragedy ensues. *But was the child harmed?* Yes, morally if not materially. How? The child was *wronged* even if not harmed in a narrower sense; it was wronged because its well-being was placed *unnecessarily* at risk. Another example: a peeping Tom places a hidden camera in the dressing room of a department store which films people in various states of undress. The peeping Tom does this for private enjoyment and does not reveal what is filmed to anyone else. No invasion of privacy is ever *discovered* by anyone; hence no negative consequences ensue for those whose privacy was violated. Is this behavior, then *not* wrong, then? *It is*, though it may never be discovered and never result in any material, psychological, or social harm to the persons filmed. For more on non-consequential *wrongness*, see Appendix on "the good rapist."

7. Where harms and benefits may be traded on equal terms, e.g., five units of harm may be compensated with five or more units of benefits. This straightforward fungibility of harms and benefits is denied from a deontological perspective.

Thus, procreation is morally problematic.⁸ What *greater* harm are you saving the non-existent from by presuming you do them a favor to confer existence on them? You do not consult with them prior and, if you are moved by the asymmetry between the duty to avoid harm and any duty to facilitate benefits, then the first duty trumps the second.

It's not impossible that promoting positive experiences is still justified for other reasons that override the asymmetry, but we will need to make these explicit and examine them critically. The burden to do so falls on those who think well of what they are doing when they bring about life. The burden placement follows from the asymmetry.

Singh's specification of what it could mean to be happy with existence

Asheel Singh, in "[Furthering the Case for Anti-natalism: Seana Shiffrin and the Limits of Permissible Harm](#),"⁹ reads this principle (he calls Principle A) into Shiffrin's position:

It is permissible for one to knowingly harm unconsenting patient A to a non-trivial degree if, and only if, the following conditions are met:

- a) one imposes the harm with the reasonable expectation of thereby alleviating or saving patient A from a pre-existing or anticipated harm; and
- b) the imposed harm is a lesser harm than the harm one aims to alleviate.

The problem is that the unborn are not *experiencing* pre-existing harm or *anticipating* any *prior* to the favor you propose to do them. And perforce whatever harm you expose them to on birth, however minimal, is not doing anything to alleviate another greater harm: *there simply isn't any prior harm to alleviate...*¹⁰ Yet, anyway – and won't be – unless *you* take the initiative to make possible the exposure.

But what if you have good reason to think that, though the unborn *cannot* endorse while remaining unborn, they, in the normal course of things *postpartum*, *will* endorse your decision to change their birth status.¹¹ They *very likely* will appreciate their existence, once born, you predict. Why do you believe this? Because most existent humans do *not* express great unhappiness at being alive. Most are "happy to be here" if asked.¹² So what is the problem with conferring birth privileges on the unborn if it is highly predictable they will be grateful to be alive?

8. A case of special pleading? There is something about bringing life into the world that makes it different from every other act that affects majorly another being capable, or potentially capable, of rational agency? The "specialness" calls for an explanation.

9. "[Furthering the Case for Anti-natalism: Seana Shiffrin and the Limits of Permissible Harm](#)," Asheel Singh *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2012, 31(1).

10. Except the frustration of procreation desires or drives of the potential procreator. The prevention of this harm is, needless to say, self-regarding: I may expose others to risk of harm (and benefit) because it suits or fulfills me and/or my kind to do so.

11. Peter Singer, for example, takes [such a view](#).

12. "[Happier Than Thou: Subjective well-being meets social comparison](#)," Joachim I. Kruger, *Psychology Today*, 2021. We are not suggesting most people actually *are* happy (its absolute form is perhaps unfathomable – *relative* happiness being the only handle psychometrically graspable) but that they *report* being happy. *Most* people, even those having experienced great trauma relative to the mean, manage to salvage an excuse to say they are "happy."

As Singh explains, most existents, when asked, express happiness *with their lives*, one may concede. But that is not the same as saying they are happy to have *been born*. These claims have very different implications. I can say I am happy to be alive (at least most of the time) because I already exist and have for some time – sufficiently so to have experienced and been invested in my life. Life is *literally* all I know. I can compare my inventory of experiences with each other and draw conclusions from them. But *all* of these experiences have occurred *postpartum*.

To say “I am happy to have been born,” on the other hand, can have only one meaning (if it does not collapse to the same as saying “I am happy to be alive”). It must be mean *something remarkable and radical*. It is saying, “I can *compare* being born with what it was like *not* being born, and *from this* conclude I am happier having been born.” If that is what is meant by “happy to have been born,” we require more clarification – what exactly is being expressed here, how may such a *comparison* happen?

If “happy to be alive” and “happy to have been born” amount to the same, then such assessments are subject to all that may infect our endorsements post-birth: all the biases “that flesh is heir to,” all the Pollyannism and its derivatives cited by Benatar and on which Singh further elaborates. Once *here*, of course, I have a host of reasons to endorse being and staying here, which have nothing to do with a judgment that *my having come to be here* was a good or bad thing. In short, even if you were somehow able to consult the unborn, *per impossibile*, on an offer to change their birth status, *they* would have no knowledge base from which to answer,¹³ and, for our part, we have only that accrued post-birth.

The unborn *cannot* endorse their birth. The born *may* endorse their lives *post*-birth. What else do we expect of them? Unless suicidal or depressed, they are *successfully* making the best of a bad situation *they played no part in creating*. Responsibility for all that follows an affirmative decision on birth devolves to you, as potential procreator. And you will presume a lot if you say that, yes, you did an unalloyed good. What justifies your presumption here? Are you saying to yourself, “I will bring into the world a being of a kind that *typically* triumphs over the bad situation *that people such as me* place them in?”

Loving and living

Compare the famous line from Tennyson¹⁴:

“‘Tis Better to have *loved* and lost than never to have *loved* at all”

with one evocative of the feelings sometimes provoked by a discussion on natalism:

“‘Tis Better to have *lived* and lost than never to have *lived* at all”

The two claims attempt comparisons that are very different. Apart from whether Tennyson’s claim is true or not, it is, at least, conceivable how one might make it. It compares one *conceivable* experience

13. And we are not in a position to attribute to them a knowledge base, even a minimal one – as Rawls does for those in his “original position.” Not without *foisting* our interests (as Rawls, again, has been accused by some feminists, for instance).

14. “This expression comes from an elegy titled, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). It was published at the height of the Victorian era in 1850, the same year Tennyson became England’s Poet Laureate. Born out of a period of profound, life-altering grief for Tennyson, it was a masterpiece which he spent seventeen years contemplating and constructing.” From [History Through Fiction](#).

with another *conceivable* experience. I can understand how one may feel that even a lost love is an experience, despite the pain of loss, we might feel richer for having had. We are comparing experiences with experiences. It may not always be true, but most of us can imagine a case of its being true that having loved and lost *is* better than never having loved.

Substituting “lived” for “loved” seems to express a sentiment, at first blush, that many want to agree with. But it makes no *rational* sense. Anything in the interval between birth and death of a subject – is a candidate for qualification as an experience. But whatever such an experience is being compared to is *not*. Never to have lived means there are – or were – no experiences to compare. I cannot rationally compare any “experience in my life” (already a redundant notion) with anything it was like a day, a year, or 66 million years before I was born. All that happened in the eternity of time before my birth (or conception, if you prefer), if anything, is not, and never has been, available as a term for comparison by me. The thought is neither true nor false. The comparison proposed is incoherent.

Yet, we want to say it is *better* we came to be, and are, than never to have been. *How can we say that?*

We *feel* it to be so.

Fine, but you weren’t *feeling* anything for the eternity before – nor will you after – your term here.¹⁵

This argument is too rational. In the end, feeling explains more of experience than reason.

That may well be true.¹⁶ But then the burden shifts to explaining why we *pretend* to rationality *ever*.¹⁷

The “well-meaning” rapist

Let’s step back and see how Shiffrin’s principle may work in a different, perhaps more vivid, context. Picture a man contemplating rape thinking to himself:

I will not ask her permission because most people enjoy sexual intercourse, therefore, it is very likely she will as well. Besides, even if I am wrong now about her welcoming the pleasurable act, she might one day be happy having the possible child: most mothers who carry a child to term do.¹⁸ And if it turns out she is not among these, expressing this by having an abortion, for

15. I am, of course, ignoring notions of reincarnation, past or future lives, etc. There are deep non-identity problems arising from a lack of consensus on what anchors identity across radical change... another can of worms for another occasion.

16. As Hume remarked, “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” [Treatise on Human Nature](#), II.3.3 415.

17. We seem to want to avail ourselves of the fact of our animality as an excuse when we need one, while marveling at our specialness, our capacity for taking responsibility, *i.e.*, our “humanity.” See the section below “How we count, if we count: the arbitrariness problem.”

18. About 1% of pregnancies due to rape end in abortion; even less from incest. (“[Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives](#),” Guttmacher Institute.) *The rest?* Most mothers who carry a child to term, conceived in rape, *seek – if not always find* – excuse for the impulse to make something positive, even life-affirming, of their situation (see “[Exploring grief and shame with children born from rape - BBC World Service Documentaries | 100 Women](#)”). As Sharron Angle crudely put it, most women pregnant through rape turn “a lemon situation into lemonade” (quoted here from [The New Yorker article by Andrew Solomon](#)). The rapist, who bothers to rationalize his act, may count on this. His act is deontologically immoral, but he is not rationally deluded to think in the animal/human world: forcibly conceiving life, apart from its immorality, is far from being on a par with murder. The majority of all pregnancies are unplanned. Hence, they *cannot* be deliberate acts aimed at the procreation of members of a Kantian “Kingdom of Ends” – the *only* absolving motive according to this major moral theory. Most human lives conceived are the result of risks taken to

example, then my action cannot be as serious as it is often supposed. It inconvenienced her, but she survived. Only if I knew, in advance, that a pregnant woman *always* regrets being pregnant with the same certainty that I know that being maimed is virtually always an unmitigated misfortune, could we say I did more than a nontrivial wrong from which recovery typically happens. Perhaps, I am wrong to do what I propose but the *degree* of wrongness is limited by these facts of the world.

What is this line of thinking missing? The train of thought prises a space for – if not justification, at least excuse – an act which most people today¹⁹ find neither justifiable nor excusable. It focuses too narrowly on consequences and not enough on the respect due *the kind of being his victim is* – one capable of being rationally autonomous and, which fact, obliges others to honor the capability. Seeking prior consent is a fundamental sign of respect one shows those so capable. Suppose, further, she was temporarily indisposed for giving consent (e.g., unconscious, drugged, etc.), might her consent be *inferred* from the fact, if it is true, that *most* people, not so indisposed, *would* give it?... Can the fact that most people are reasonably happy with their lives justify a judgment that they *would have* consented to being conceived if they had been consulted by their progenitors?

In both cases, that of the unborn and that of the indisposed victim of rape, soliciting consent is not possible. How may it *unilaterally* be inferred by another seeking to commandeer the path of their – the patient’s or victim’s – life? Or does consent not matter?...

Harms and benefits are not fungible. I cannot make up for a harm I do you by benefiting you – not without your *prior* consent... The premise falls out of a culture with a pretense to human dignity. The

serve pleasures. We *excuse* taking these risks if they are consensual and do not violate cultural norms. That any excuse at all is required signals their moral ambiguity. As described, these life-resulting acts, in the typical case, are not the result of agency but of concessions to heteronomous impulses. As Kant noted, anything less than a deliberate act of procreation out of regard for the godlikeness of the possible resulting being is an expression of adiaphorous animality. A hedonic motive in engaging in sexual intercourse easily slips into immorality given the hyperbolic demands of Kantianism which enjoin *transparency* of motive. If sexual intercourse were as pleasurable typically as a root canal without anesthesia, human development would have halted long ago. But *then* we might believe that children conceived *in spite of this* would be products of genuine moral agency. The psychological need to posit or concoct certain cognitive frameworks such as the possibility of being “conceived in love” supplements the biophysical pleasure of the act to insure nothing impedes the expansion of a gene pool. As Bianco Luno once put it, “The world is populated by rapists” (*Tweets from Hell*, 935). He finishes a thought rooted in Kant and made more explicit by Otto Weininger. “Some rapists may love, or come to love, their victims, and some victims even return the feelings, but that does not stop them being rapists and accomplices,” Luno elaborates in unpublished notes... In case it is not clear, the aspersion here is *moral* (in the sense of being deeply and widely manifested in civilized human behavior), and nothing to do with *legal* dispensations (historically contingent practices of one sort or another) themselves manifesting as social instruments for regulating hereditary trait dispersal through sanctioned sex within marriage or the category of “consensual sex,” for example. *No sex is consensual in the relevant sense: that implicating rational autonomy*. In its throes, the act is complete surrender to adiaphorous animality: *not wrong – not necessarily (even Kant concedes this) – but not moral*. (There is, for Kant, a third possibility: the *amoral*, the adiaphorous, manifesting throughout the animal world.) If sex is a requirement on the level of food and water to give purpose or motivational sustenance to life without which aspirations to the rational exercise of autonomy would have no field for operation, then, in this indirect way, we (“made the way we is” as Gertrude Stein expressed it) cannot dispense with it. But the need is contingent. The exercise of rational autonomy is not defined by it. It is, so to speak, a requirement of the *embodied* to grasp and transcend their own physical contingency. *But this exercise in rational autonomy is a cure for a disease the nonexistent don’t get*.

19. Needless to say, the idea that *consent* is of paramount moral concern is an historically youthful insight – a fallout of a trajectory of moral development (which we discuss at the end of this writeup). See Andrew Solomon’s piece “[The Legitimate Children of Rape](#)” in the *The New Yorker*, cited earlier, which begins with a short introduction into the problematicity of rape.

upshot of the argument it motivates will be that *the same thing that makes rape wrong makes procreation wrong*.

In Appendix 3 below, we explore more thoroughly the reasoning here and what may be learned from comparing “well-meaning rapists” and “well-meaning” parents. For now, we will make a long detour around this provocation, necessary to set it in context.

...

Next, we discuss an accusation by Nicholas Smyth that *both* sides of the antinatalism/pronatalism debate abstract themselves from human relevance. Then, we respond to Smyth on his own existentialist terms by trying to get as phenomenologically personal and concrete as possible.

Finally, we make a case for the idea that extinction, *in one form or another*, is a foregone conclusion. There remains only the important question: *are there better and worse ways to go about disappearing?*

“Existentially grounding” the debate

A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.

– Spinoza, [Ethics, Part IV](#), Proposition, 67

Why should the predictable suffering and/or happiness of non-existent descendants matter to a potential parent? Nicholas Smyth asks. *Does it?* And if it does, *why* should such considerations figure in decisions to procreate? Smyth accuses Benatar and other antinatalists *as well as* pronatalists, such as Gheaus,²⁰ of asking and answering questions far removed from the existential concerns of people making such momentous personal decisions (to the extent any real *decisions* are being made and we are not merely observing and participating animal behavior). The remove is so extreme that the debate cannot amount to more than academic answers to academic questions – that is, the questions and the answers are so abstract as not to offer either useful guidance or rational urgency to the bulk of humanity, more concerned, as most humans are, with navigating life’s exigencies than with being – *always and in every way* – right.²¹

We quote Smyth at length below because the existential phenomenology he employs benefits more from narrative than analytic nitpickery. (In the same vein, we will offer some of our own in the sections following.)

Prospective parents are asking: should *I* have children? And Benatar’s answer, at this stage, is: no, because procreation *in general* produces a great deal of aggregate suffering. **[I will have more to say about the significance of “aggregate suffering,” shortly.]** But is this an answer to the question? Only if the aggregate suffering produced by a *type* of action is a consideration that ought to weigh decisively the first personal performance of a *token* of that type. But this is, to put it mildly, a highly contentious thesis, one which Benatar never defends.²²

20. Benatar and Gheaus are discussed in [Part 1](#).

21. Moral concern and rational discipline occur as spotty gratuities, notwithstanding what philosophers may say. We must abstract from lived reality to take it seriously. It is because I know that very few will read and understand what I write in this essay that I am licensed to write it.

22. This and the following indented passages in this section are from “[What Is the Question to which Anti-Natalism Is the Answer?](#)” Nicholas Smyth, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2020) 23:71–87.

The abstraction:

The idea that coming to feel a certain way about one's life partly *constitutes* the goodness of that life is alien to his more third-personal mode, which looks instead to such measurable, quantifiable elements as physical or financial health as determinants of well-being.

Citing evolution may explain but does not justify:

Now, in support of the claim that we are biased against the truth about our lives, Benatar sometimes runs a different, even more abstract argument. He has claimed that our inclination to see life as generally good is the product of *evolutionary* influence, and that this has biased us against the cold reality:

Anti-natalist views, whatever their source, run up against an extremely powerful pronatalist bias. This bias has its roots in the evolutionary origins of human (and more primitive animal) psychology and biology. Those with pro-natal views are more likely to pass on their genes (Benatar 2006, p. 8).

Unfortunately for Benatar, it is now well-understood by those working on evolutionary debunking that the mere fact that we were in some sense *bound* to arrive at some evaluative orientation, given Darwinian influence, says nothing about the normative status of that orientation. Rather, it is only when the evolutionary influence is shown to *positively distort* our evaluative outlook that its justification is called into question (Copp 2008; Vavova 2014). But this, of course, requires just the sort of argument that is missing from Benatar's texts: a non-question-begging way of establishing that life actually *is* bad overall, such that we can positively establish that evolutionary influences have pushed us off-track.

Evolution is indeed *not* a normative force, I agree. At best, it describes a prehistory to our physical and psychological constitution. Yes, we are inclined to look on the bright side because, at least up to the present, this has been conducive to our survival. But no less has it been useful *for some of us some of the time* to obsess with the dark side. This too has been conducive to survival.²³ Not all of us jump off cliffs expecting optimistically to evolve wings on the way down... we discount this or that observation willy-nilly *both* at our peril *and* to our advantage. This is neither good nor bad in itself. *It is what we do*. It only becomes one or the other when a project takes hold of us and/or a normatively-laden observation interferes. *Then*, we take a normative stand: we draw conclusions about what to *do*.

What happens in real life, Smyth sums up:

The decision to procreate is often made by someone who is intensely engrossed in a series of intimate questions: am I ready for this challenge? Is this the kind of love I can accept into my life? Will I be able to provide care and support for my child? Will this decision alter my relationship with my partner in undesirable ways? Is this the sort of world into which I wish to bring a child? I find it instructive to imagine such a person picking up a book on procreative ethics and reading that this collection of difficult and deeply personal questions can be tossed aside, because:

23. See, for instance, neuroscientist Tali Sharot's talk on [optimism bias](#).

- (1) The absence of pain is good even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone; and the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation,
- (2) Human procreation is causally related to the production of large amounts of suffering, and
- (3) Life is bad, but you don't notice that because evolution has made you biased.

It should be clear that there is at least a *problem* here: how could such abstract, impersonal thoughts have practical authority over the decisions of real agents who are confronted with this important decision? Strikingly, many contemporary procreative ethicists, pro-natalists included, have not even acknowledged that this sort of problem exists. Instead, they have mainly followed Benatar in continuing to write in highly impersonal terms about sufferings, harms and duties, usually in impartial and quantitative terms.

Smyth proceeds to list and briefly discuss several antinatalist *and* pronatalist philosophers (procreative ethicists, generally), who, in his view, address questions and entertain answers *existentially* far removed from “applied ethics,” and, if so, have nothing to offer prospective parents about their decision to be such.

...Each of these philosophers names a state of affairs—the relative size of an ecological footprint, the production of valuable genetic material, the overall badness of the average person's life, tax bases, pension plans—and rather startlingly moves from certain possible-future states of affairs to an entirely distinct deontic judgment (that procreation is *forbidden*, *required*, or what have you). Once the values of prospective states of affairs have been weighed, and the probabilistic calculations are in, the deontic status of procreation is established, and that is that.

But what is this work *for*? What is its purpose? Who is supposed to read it, and who is supposed to accept its conclusions about procreation? These questions lead us to a more general problem: what, exactly, is applied ethics supposed to be?

...

For these philosophers, moral philosophy simply aims at theoretical discovery, an activity which may quell various metaphysical worries but which is not actually meant to help us *decide* anything. Indeed, if the task of procreative ethics is simply to *register* these facts, to note their existence on some cosmic ledger, then perhaps that task has been accomplished by the procreative ethicists I am discussing.

...

One way to summarize what has been said is to say that there are more and less personal ways to do ethics. It will be said, rightly, that moral philosophy cannot be *wholly* personal. The activity of philosophy requires a certain abstraction and reflective distance from situational particulars. Be that as it may, each successive step toward abstraction leaves something behind, and my diagnosis is that each step leaves us successively less able to answer questions

about practicality and authority.

...

Rather than directly deploy predicates like “pleasurable”, we might approach the problem by following those existentialist philosophers who claim that only our consciousness of *death* can illuminate the meaning of our life. We might, in other words, ask the following question:

Suppose I am on my deathbed in a number of years, reflecting back on the point or purpose of my life. Suppose further that I decide that it has all been worth it. Is *this* the sort of experience which I would cite as part of a justification for that judgment?

If the answer is a resonant and wholehearted ‘yes’, then the experience is, for a person, *existentially grounding*.^[24] While its significance is potentially shareable, its function is not primarily to justify one’s actions to others. Rather, its function is to *justify one’s life to oneself, to the person who must actually live it*. I have deliberately chosen an example that may seem trivial, one that may induce some to wonder why I would ever include something so mundane as an evening’s cooking in a paper about moral philosophy. But that is precisely the point: to the person *having* the experience it may be quite serious indeed, and its triviality to you, the analytically disengaged reader, is neither here nor there. It is not *meant* for you, because it is not an answer to any question that *you* are currently asking.

...

Any broadly subjective account of well-being will have the same feature. But this possibility does not, to my knowledge, receive any treatment in Benatar’s work. *The idea that coming to feel a certain way about one’s life partly constitutes the goodness of that life is alien to his more third-personal mode, which looks instead to such measurable, quantifiable elements as physical or financial health as determinants of well-being*. And this argumentative lacuna is exactly what you would expect from a philosopher who is so unconcerned to answer questions about practicality and authority.

To illustrate, Smyth quotes the first person meditation of a mother (E. Krause) contemplating the meaning of her parenthood as she observes her young child...

It’s a bittersweet process, the changing of the seasons. The switch itself is beautiful—the fire in the trees, the long shadows on the ground, the harvest sunsets, the cool air on sunburned skin... That spark, that first orange leaf, always makes me feel sad. I tend to start missing things before they’re gone. *At least*, I think to myself as I watch the burnt leaves fall, *summer will come around again*. Life is, after all, a very cyclical kind of thing.

24. Four suicides in his family, haunted lifelong by thoughts of inadequacy and suicide himself... and Wittgenstein, on his deathbed, says, “Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.” See “[It’s a Wonderful Life: Reflections on Wittgenstein’s Last Words](#),” Ronald L. Hall, *Philosophical Investigations*, 23 August 2010, and “[Wittgenstein and the ethics of suicide. Homosexuality and Jewish Self-Hatred in fin de siècle Vienna](#),” *Educational Philosophy And Theory* 2019, vol. 51, no. 10, 981–990.

It's 7:00 PM and I'm snuggled up in a rocking chair with my son under a green and yellow knitted baby blanket that used to belong to his dad. The fire...fills the room with a warm amber light that shifts on the walls and plays on the pages of the book open in front of us...

Someday these leaves will burn up and he'll be a kid who goes to school, and I'll miss him—but he'll be ok. It will be another new beginning, another spring. Someday he won't live in my house anymore, but maybe he'll meet someone special and start a family. And then maybe, the moment he lays eyes on his own baby, he'll catch a glimpse into how I feel about him. That will be another spring.²⁵

Krause uses plain language to express something with which many of us are familiar: that sense of change, decay and inevitable loss we can feel as the seasons change. Moreover, for her, the decision to procreate represents her redemptive participation in an ancient and apparently sacred cycle. Her life has presented her with an unavoidable question: **how can I make sense of loss and change?** And her son is, in many ways, an answer to that question. And this, by the way, is a question which has plainly been of enormous practical urgency for people throughout human history.

In any case, this is the narrative into which she places her son's existence. He is how she makes peace with change, decay and loss. Her words may resonate with some readers; if so, this passage can help to illuminate existential reasons they share with Krause. Others will find her perspective maudlin, sentimental or even silly. But this is perfectly compatible with my main claim, since her experience is existentially grounding for *her* and no one else. Moreover, there is something odd, perhaps even downright absurd, in expecting first-personal reflections on a life's meaning to be anything other than *sentimental*.

In any case, these are the sorts of reflections I find when I, in blatant defiance of the conventions of so much procreative ethics, consult what has actually been written by parents about their children. The more one reads this literature, which is full of struggle, joy and heartbreak, the more astonishing it seems that philosophers like MacIver and Young cannot see their way to a meaningful distinction between procreation and producing carbon emissions while driving to work. Indeed, the idea that childbearing might be fundamentally about the construction of narrational meaning or existential purpose doesn't even *feature* in any of the multiple works cited above. This is only possible because theorists have dogmatically chosen to occupy a disengaged, bureaucratic standpoint on human decision-making, the very perspective that sees all practical questions as collapsible into the question of which possible worlds are best.

Importantly, Krause's intimately personal thoughts **do not serve to justify a right or permission** to procreate, since they are not answers to questions about rights or permissions. They are not meant to stand as a reason for anyone else to procreate, nor are they meant to rebut the claim that significant future sufferings may occur if one has a child. They are an answer to the

25. Krause E (2017) "The things that come around again." In: Gadd, A (ed) *The magic of motherhood: the good stuff, the hard stuff, and everything in between*, p. 14.

existential question, and thus have automatic practical relevance for anyone who finds them compelling. This is why procreative ethicists face an uphill battle. These philosophers wish to bring certain moral-theoretical considerations to bear on the perspective of prospective biological parents, but not only are those considerations of dubious relevance to that perspective, there is almost certainly a different kind of consideration which is immediately practical and authoritative—existential grounding.

“Insistence” existence

If only *aggregate suffering* matters, why not encourage and celebrate suicide as *virtuous* behavior? Not force it, of course – because of how little “scaled moral importance” rests on whether any *one* of us does or doesn’t persist, rather pedestalize voluntary self-elimination as *the* supreme human moral act? Isn’t it self-indulgent to persist in the face of the tax each of us places on the aggregate well-being of the world? As Otto Weininger pronounced and illustrated, *each breath we take is one robbed from another more worthy*.²⁶ (See below on the “paths to extinction,” Path 3.)

Again, certainly, in the scheme of things, each of us doesn’t count for much, and so our absence wouldn’t much either. Still, those, realizing this, who act accordingly, are these not models of moral excellence – able and willing to

subordinate their existence for that of the lot, consciously (as Weininger) or not (as one of the nameless horde of those who think they have lived or died for a noble cause)? If it’s true, for example, that few human acts contribute more to lowering CO² emissions than *not* having a child – a decision *fifty times* more effective at lessening environmental damage than not having a car, switching to energy efficient appliances, recycling, etc., then, having missed out on the opportunity to fail at being born, there is still opportunity to mitigate damage even *midway* through a life.

NUMBER OF METRIC TONS CO2 THAT CAN BE SAVED BY INDIVIDUAL'S ACTION



[“Demographic Shifts and Carbon Emissions: Can Population Decline Solve Global Environmental Challenges?”](#) Roos van Keulen at *Earth.org*

...

Since Smyth opens the door to the *subjective assessment* of the value of a life, and I am highly sympathetic to this move – I take existentialism on such matters more seriously than most analytic philosophers, I will pass through the door:

Speaking for myself, I am not suicidal, at least not now. But I detect no great virtue in my motives. Yes, there are people in my life I would not want to injure by softening their resolve to find, or make, meaning in their own lives through imposing on them the spectacle of my failure to self-deceive as well as they. I suffer from what (I think) is hyperbolic empathy. I *feel* this. But what I *understand* about this is only arrogance, vanity, and cowardice. Like the victim of a [suicide by cop](#), I would rather provoke

26. The “more worthy” are the non-, less, or yet-to-be conscious: lower animals, flora, ecosystems, etc. Unworthiness he tied to moral awareness. See our discussion of *inexorable expansion of empathetic imagination* in the extinction section below.

conditions to do me in than display full-fledged agency. I want my human or natural environment to do the dirty work for me. I am, everyday, when not distracted,²⁷ *daring* the world to dismiss me.

But what if my *personal* well-being indeed mattered apart from how I may or may not feel about it – [rule-based moral theories](#) *be damned?*²⁸ And I don't mean this as one weight-bearing brick in an edifice or as a small but meaningful contribution to the larger project of human destiny – whatever that is – but *all by itself*: the meaning of *my* life as a thing to be reckoned with? Nor do I mean that I matter *just* for myself. *I mean the entire universe would be a less wonderful place in my absence.* Admittedly, in a small way, but all the same... Nothing about the universe matters, *but I do*. Even if infinitesimally little. All else may be – *but I am not* – nothing.

Vanity is phenomenally real. It is a favorite whipping boy of moralizing tendencies, but, as a matter of fact, I *do* feel I am special and not just because I owe others the gesture of feeling this way (because it would license them to feel a bit this way, too, and thereby lend support to their own vanity), but because no entity in the universe ever has, or ever will have, the perspective I have.²⁹ My perspective is *intrinsically* valuable. I can *assert* this. On the basis of having just said so. The *very fact I can assert it* makes me one of those extraordinary beings³⁰ who may generate significance out of thin air. I *am*, not because I think, as Descartes bullshat, but because I *insist*. I am a monster of normativity. I create value of a sort that no one has before or ever will: that generated *by me*. In *this* would be grounded the *criminality* of my suicide. It is what would make my willful exit a *shame*. The *only* such thing.

Do *you* also insist? Let's call it *insistence existence*. In this way, I approximate all the other furnishings, even the inanimate ones, in the universe which never evince any hesitation or hint of remorse at being what they are, or being at all. I am a locus of esteem. A veritable monad of conceit.

But who or what, then, is the target of these remonstrances? Who or what am I trying to convince of my exceptionalism? As an individual or as aggregate of such, are we insisting that *together* we form a block of existential resistance to despair – *while not asking who or what cares about this besides us*.

The personal is universal.

– Kierkegaard³¹

Replace “I” with “we” above. Vanity scaled to the level of an entire species is no less vanity.

27. E.g., I have shown myself expert at distraction – thus far.

28. Kant, in particular, ranked suicide with murder as a pinnacle of immorality. A utilitarian would value me *at least* as a vessel, among countless, containing potentially what has value and contributing to a significant aggregate – if not intrinsically. These theories offer excuse, not justification, for persisting.

29. The opposite of such swagger, “humility,” as a virtue is easily construed as the essence of arrogance. Just *who* am I trying to fool? The paradox of humility is that in kneeling before others I quietly demean them by stroking their vanity in pretending to lower myself to their level: the level of those who *enjoy* flattery. As a horde of classic moralists have adverted: “We do not like to praise, and we never praise without a motive. Praise is flattery, artful, hidden, delicate, which gratifies differently him who praises and him who is praised. The one takes it as the reward of merit, the other bestows it to show his impartiality and knowledge.” – La Rochefoucauld [Maxims](#), or Ambrose Bierce, who in [The Devil's Dictionary](#), defined “egotist” as “a person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.” Even so forgiving a character as Francis of Assisi was alive to the duplicity of any expression *not action or silence*, “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

30. Such as Kant gestured at, a bit god-like.

31. Whether the quote is direct or not, it paraphrases a core premise of Kierkegaard's work. Slogans have been made of it.

Asserting one's self-esteem seems to imply I exist in a milieu that might question it. What does this environment that I seek to impress, by offering it a justification, consist in?... I, or we, have rigged it so that only I, or the lot of my select co-conspirators, need be consulted.

In another time, I would have appealed to something on high whose inscrutable purposes I should not question or disappoint. Today, more secularly, post-Enlightenment, it is fashionable to take pride in the capabilities and accomplishments of my kind, that is, in my *humanity*. We, and we alone, collectively, are the sole arbiters of all significance and value in the known universe. People, "humans," even use the adjectives "humanistic" or "humanitarian" to signal something "good..." Says *who*?

...

I imagine I create my targets for dramatic effect. I fear boredom. *You* also?

...

We must, however, acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system – with all these exalted powers – Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.

– Charles Darwin, closing lines of the [*Descent of Man*](#) (1882)

Existential grounding dictates no final position in the ethics of procreation debate, as Smyth points out. Existence is epistemically promiscuous. Excuse, for it, is indiscriminate. But it does explain the distinction we made at the start (in Part 1) between *practical* and *theoretical* antinatalisms and pronatalisms. If our species is depopulating, it has little to do with philosophical arguments on either side. As animals, we have been reacting to our physical, psychological, and socio-economic environment since before these abstractions were remarked as fields of contemplation and study, since the days when it was just called "life." *If* they are depopulating, people are doing it for the same reason they populated in the first place...

Does this mean that philosophy is impotent as a developmental force in our history?

How we count, if we count: the arbitrariness problem

At one end on a scale of significance – the "objective" end, each of us counts for *zero, nothing, nada...* In the unabridged scheme of things, we don't rate. We'll call this nihilism. Pure science, with its pretense to objectivity, points this way.

At the other end, we, *each* of us, counts for *everything*. The universe owes *its* significance to us. Nothing outside the world we have experienced, or can experience, has any excuse or right to notice or valuation without our having deigned to bestow it. Subjectivity is king. In this way, a suicide may destroy the entirety of the universe afflicting him or her.

Moralizing tendencies, especially those hardened into theories, set themselves against the latter. Religion, in therapeutic mode, as when God confers “choseness” upon us and not those others, seeks to console us from the threat of the former.

A third possible scope of significance, where most of the actual living of living things happens, is a middle ground between the two listed: a conceptual territory smaller than what is conceivable but larger than the smallest unit of individual interest. We, all of us, *live* here. It is not possible to live at the poles. Suicide or extermination awaits those who try – those *not* hypocritical.

The trouble for those in this middle ground I will call *the arbitrariness problem*.

Let me explain. The logic goes like this: if it is true that we, *each of us*, counts for zero, the sum of the nearly 9 billion zeros on the planet is still zero. An aggregate comprised of nothings remains nothing. *We don't count* – not even all of us together. *Period*. Few take this possibility seriously who manage to stay alive (leaving aside the odd academic, for whom hypocrisy is a critical survival skill).

Most sober people want to say, we count for *something*. But modesty has a vast range to work with. The more modest want to say we, as individuals, or even as a species, or even as life forms, count for something greater than zero. Perhaps less than 1. Perhaps, only 0.000...1, but *something, not zero*. The universe is big, they concede, but we are *not* nothing.

A more human-sized modesty asserts a much greater modicum of significance. Its manifesters will say, “I and my loved ones, friends, pets, community, recent ancestors, near-term descendants, contemporaries, compatriots, the class or classes defined by my culture, ethnicity, race, sex (identity whether psychological, social, biological and/or orientation); coreligionists, my political party, my philosophical school, fellow fans of this or that team, associations of the like-minded or shared interests; species, genera, biospheric companions with vertebrates, with faces, with opposable thumbs, with consciousness, with awareness, with sentience, with reasoning capabilities, or without any such... etc. etc.... all in *this* corner, however small, however large, of the universe, *count*. We will pick from an inexhaustible supply of possible cohorts featured in this or that way to affiliate with and say *this* subset, *that* sortal, matters, and what we leave out matters less, or not at all, or so little we can ignore it for any practical purposes we have.” “Purposes we have...,” the self-validating subset declaims, unabashedly.

This is *the arbitrariness problem*. It happens when significance is generated by those who make certain to arrogate to themselves the right to designate the lion's share of what matters. Indeed, “what matters” will be defined as *what matters to them*. Yet, these want to say they are not like the deprecated subjectivists, for whom they often express much disdain: the selfish, the narcissists, those who shamelessly assert their specialness,... the “deplorables,” the likes of which, the world would not miss if they went missing since they are not represented among the “chosen.”

Who makes these demarcations and with *what* authority? Like Nietzsche, we'll assume that God lies dead in a ditch somewhere decomposing, and can't be consulted for validating our convictions. Science, if it is not a thinly veiled religion, is not available to offer guidance. If lucky, we might get more or less useful but ephemeral descriptions of the situation from that quarter, but nothing by way

direction. That will come from *our* assertions of normativity, from saying *this* matters and *that* doesn't or matters less.³²

This is *as* true for the supreme subjectivist, the solipsistic axiologist, *as* for the subset-affiliated. If arbitrariness is a bad thing, *both* are sullied. The dispute between them is where to draw the line. True objectivity has nothing to contribute to settling the case. True, unsubverted, uncompromised, objectivity is utterly indifferent to any and all of our projects.

What *can* be said for it is that the subset has numbers on its side. "There is *strength* in numbers." Goodness, truth, beauty, barely hidden vanities,... accrete *in numbers*? The strength factor will settle the question. Thrasymachus argued "might makes right," collapsing truth and justice to power.³³ Thrasymachus was wrong, of course... *we*, with Plato, will *insist*. But Thrasymachus *observed*.

We and what we say counts because *we* say so.

...

To this extent, Smyth is right to rub our nose in the fact that *the content* of our lives³⁴ owes nothing to a perspective that purposely abstracts from it. We do not – and no living thing ever – pays much attention to pronouncements about what the right thing to do is – *all-things-considered*. Instinctively, if not lucidly, we know that: all-things-considered, *nothing matters*. Value exist because *some* things matter without implying that *all* do, or can – *for beings made the way we are*. Rob me of the importance of every petty decision I make each day, stupid, harmful, delusional... though it be, hold me accountable to the universe for every wrong I do, and you deny that anything about me has value. And, for all I can know, this assessment of the value, if any, inhering in, or emanating from, me is correct. And, if true of me, the case universalizes to cover all of us: another reason we should excuse ourselves from existence, individually *and* collectively – if we can be bothered to do so. And it would be a *bother*.

Since I think we are beyond recovering the callousness of being only mere animals, the path ahead seems clear. Annoyance with existence is fated to overwhelm us, so it is written in our evolutionarily derived script. One day, if the event is not unceremoniously forestalled, we will exit in disgust at the

32. Mere existence forces arbitrariness. This shows up in a myriad of exigent contexts: A high school shooting is attributed to the accessibility of firearms *or* the irresponsibility of parents *or* a corrupted educational institution *or* an economically stricken tax-base unable to afford the resources to constructively engage the young *or* bad decisions expediently made decades earlier by governing officials *or*... Adam's having succumbed to Eve's offer. Very, very likely any and all of these are credibly responsible – perhaps excepting the last. But almost never is citing the full list attempted. Nearly always we pick what suits a much narrower agenda. Existence may explain, perhaps excuse, but never justify.

33. "In the [first book of... \[Plato's\] Republic](#), Thrasymachus attacks Socrates' position that justice is an important good. He claims that 'injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice' (344c). In the course of arguing for this conclusion, Thrasymachus makes three central claims [about a more correct notion] of justice.

1. Justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger (338c)

2. Justice is obedience to laws (339b)

3. Justice is nothing but the advantage of another (343c)." [IEP](#).

34. We concede here that analytic philosophy is defined by a high tolerance for abstraction and an overweening deference to an Enlightenment vision of our rational capabilities or interest in their employment. It may survey and demarcate existential real estate, but, without availing of external and grounded resources, it offers little by the way of guidance on what is to transpire on the premises. Glorifying method over substance, it is prone to lending hypocrisy a veneer of modesty.

realization the universe, as is, *actually* harbors logical contradictions. It is normatively sterile. It will sink in that it was never about us.³⁵

Full stop: paths to extinction³⁶

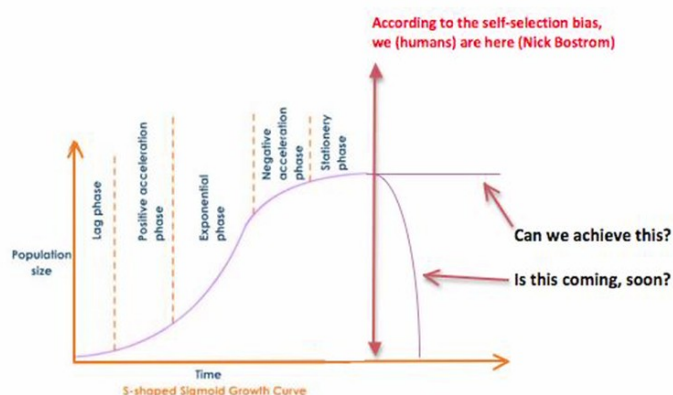
I lay these out as a logical exercise in what is *possible* – not as probable or morally incumbent. I am not a fortune-teller; rather I list them first in the least laden, most inert, bare sense of logical possibility. More discussion follows the listing. If there is partiality in evidence, it is aesthetic.³⁷

1. Non-anthropogenic

We go thanks to a rock fall from space, a geothermal burp, a twitch in the cosmic rhythm of procession, a gamma ray ejaculated from a nearby exploding star, etc... Ask a dinosaur how this went.

2. Anthropogenic extinction³⁸

- **Anthropogenic but *stupid*:** not much to say here either. Self-nukery, trashed environment, genetic tinkering with disease agents and/or their treatments, [AI discovering](#) it can handle matters better without meat-head interference... A plan to dodge bullets of these sorts indefinitely does not inspire confidence.
- **Anthropogenic via *agency*:** through a *conscious* reasoned decision, because it is the *best* thing to do, all things we are *capable of* considering. “Best” here meaning a consequence of applying moral/aesthetic values in arriving at a *decision* – as opposed to having our strings pulled by evolutionary impulses or processes that are utterly oblivious to our claims to being special or exceptional. Because we will have shown we are *sensitive* to “the Good” or, at least, “the Beautiful” if never in possession of “the Truth.”³⁹



The fate of all species so far... Nick Bostrom

Leaving aside the stupider ways we may go, the *argument from the evolutionary trajectory of consciousness* proposes, as the driver toward this denouement, the expansion of *empathetic imagination* across:

- space,
- time, and
- awareness

35. We may have *needed* to exist to realize this. *Why* the realization needed to happen at all is ultimate perversity. But, echoing [Sharron Angle](#), we make lemonade.

36. This final section on “the paths to extinction” is largely owing to Bianco Luno. [Soundtrack to this section.](#)

37. Which, unlike logic and ethics, passes [priceless judgments](#).

38. Like “[shades of gray](#)” or “[ways to leave your lover](#),” there must be at least fifty ways extinction might happen, but we are mostly interested in those that involve well-considered decisions by beings capable of such. Of the possible ways, any in this class is the *least* likely to happen, but would be the most *philosophically* interesting. So we dwell on them.

39. The [Transcendentals...](#) whence these bulwarks of “meaningfulness”?

The inexorable stretch⁴⁰ in the range and intensity of our capacity for concern triangulates an outcome. Our knack for pushing outward the boundaries of moral awareness across temporal, spatial, or epistemic parameters *dooms* our existence. And since, it seems, we are expanding on all fronts, sooner seems likely. Our exit is, thus, overdetermined. We go, if we go voluntarily, via one or more of the ways in the following disjunction – which is meant to be exhaustive:

- **material transformation:**
extinction by metamorphosis, *i.e.*, post- or transhumanism;
- **stasis by force of will:**
extinction by boredom: we exhaust ourselves treading water in an ocean of existence; or
- **voluntary axiological realization:**
ethically – *merciful* extinction, or aesthetically – *graceful* extinction

Imagine being plopped in the middle of an ocean with nowhere to swim. You quickly evolve the capabilities of a fish, drown flailing, or slip quietly beneath the surface. This is meant to exhaust physical/logical possibilities. If it does, *is there room for a path to survival?* If there isn't, our goose is cooked, or... we are missing something. What?⁴¹

Path 1: *transformation*

We have discussed this way out in more detail elsewhere.⁴² Briefly, it is to disappear by becoming *something else*. The way our primate ancestors disappeared to make way for us, the way children disappear to make way for their adult devolutions, or the way caterpillars become butterflies. Nothing stays the same, Heraclitus adverted. We evolve either through force of will and/or natural processes so that we lose some features and gain others. The transhumanists/posthumanists/longtermists – “*foreverists*,” as I dub them – have something like this in mind. I judge, barring some *deus ex machina* or human catastrophe, this Nietzschean path forward seems likely.⁴³

40. Peter Singer began *Animal Liberation* pointing out how implausible the notion of granting women equal status and consideration once was. He cited Thomas Taylor's satirical *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (published the same year and playing off Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, 1792), suggesting that at the time he, Singer, was writing (in the early 1970s) similar consideration of the interest of animals was widely dismissed. Circles of human concern expand *inexorably*, he gestured then and went on to make explicit in *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (1981). Already in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972), he sought to erode the moral significance of geographic and familial distance. Both rule-based major theories, Kantianism and utilitarianism, in their unadulterated forms, are committed to making an imperative of this expansion. Even non-utilitarians and non-Kantians, such as Samuel Scheffler, have stressed [the softness of temporal boundaries of identification and concern](#), though, in line with virtue theory, with more moderation than the rule-based theories... All such theories tread existential water.

41. The contents of the disjuncts are *inductive* possibilities. What *else* has human experience, in its totality, taught us is probable? The argument presented is open to revision if something, not subsumed by one or another of the disjuncts, turns up.

42. “[Tranhumanism and the nonidentity problem](#)” and “[Sci-fi ethics: foreverism v. existentialism](#).” Questions around the presumption of *morally relevant* identity or continuity across change will be its own future topic.

43. See [Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?](#) ed. by Yunus Tuncel for transhumanist evocations in Nietzsche.

We only point out the obvious, an axiological variant of the old [Ship of Theseus](#) problem: how much may a thing change before identification spanning one of its stages and another becomes incoherent or arbitrary?⁴⁴ The problem becomes *morally* acute asking, when (not if) an agential thing becomes *another* thing, *what motivates moral concern across the discernibility gap*? Few of us are possessed of the empathetic imagination to worry much about the fate of the molecules comprising our physical bodies on our demise or what role in the universe occupied these same molecules prior to our conception – or recent meals.

Even if you find identificational solace in such sub-natural constituents or in social constructions like “humanity” or an old-fashioned immaterial soul – whatever, if we can think it being a thing, we can think it having parts, and, if we can think that, we can think the parts losing fathomable organization. The law of identity in logic is sure that everything is vacuously identical with itself. *But nothing else is, nothing that insists on distinguishing itself...* Only as an agenda-driven project of some normatively-capable being. Something that *insists* with urgency that something or other *be* the case. Something alive *and* aware of it.

The thing may *die* (physically dis- or reorganize), or live *unaware*. The thesis is that *empathetic imagination expands inexorably* to preclude the second disjunct. That leaves the first. One thing follows another until, if ever, things stop. A safe tautological prediction.

So, unless empathetic capacity, or pretension to it, balloons to become one with a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it seems the “foreverists” envision, normativity collapses to description. Ethics is physics. Caring becomes obsolete. Finite history and finite anticipation are forms of caring.⁴⁵ What is there for *the infinite* to give a damn about? Then, why bother? There ceases to be a history of things ever having been anything but inert – or anything sufficiently perduring to remark on the fact.

Unless you stretch your empathetic imagination to conclude that you are quite *literally* what you eat, making of us cannibals from birthday to deathday... Or your immortal identity has, since the beginning of the universe, consisted in one or another of variously configured subatomic particles *and* this fact *mysteriously matters* to you... Barring such, transformation is one way to become extinct. Another is...

Path 2: *stasis*

“And die so slowly, that none call it murder!”
– Samuel Taylor Coleridge⁴⁶

Become content with a real or imagined vision of how we are, or ought to be, then work to achieve the vision, if we haven’t already. *Then stop*. Surely, we are not clueless as to what this vision is like? If the most you can imagine is *more of the same*, this path is for you.⁴⁷ Perennial incremental progress? If you can imagine that, “more of the same” includes that, too. We have been making incremental progress toward something or other for a very long while now. For an instant in cosmic time, to be precise. If

44. What Derek Parfit identified as the “non-identity problem” can be traced to this ancient problem.

45. Samuel Scheffler [expresses this](#) nicely.

46. [Religious Musings : A Desultory Poem Written On The Christmas Eve Of 1794.](#)

47. A willingness to accept “more of the same” is a profound conviction in beings as capacitated as we. A cosmic equilibrium of contentment with – not merely the state but – *the course of things ad infinitum* is akin to a tolerance for a Nietzschean “eternal return.” To the degree any such thing is even conceivable “made the way we is.” Made that way, we cannot have it both ways: metamorphosis *and* stasis.

only we could recover our pre-science naivety... when the skies were yet ungodded or, before that even, when we had no conceptions beyond what we might eat as far out as the day after tomorrow. We have come a long way *but so slowly* that it seems a long time. Meanwhile, we note our capabilities are augmenting rapidly. Faster than, it seems, our knowledge of what to do with them. Can we really *pause* progress long enough to consider this? A moratorium on technical advancement?⁴⁸ Have we ever successfully restrained ourselves beyond what our congenital amnesia for history enforces? *Anthropogenic* extinction was, not that long ago in history, very hard to conceive.⁴⁹ Now, it is easy to do – and in many ways.

Stasis, holding still, long enough to figure out our trajectory seems possible. But history and induction argue against it. We are restless, *therefore*, we are. Until existential boredom sets in because we forget to forget that we have been here before, we will go on going somewhere faster and faster, I fear – or hope – not sure which. Our fidgetiness makes standing still unlikely. Boredom, feature or bug, will not allow it.

Path 3: *self-excusals* – “pardon me for having existed”⁵⁰ and the notion of *empathetic imagination*⁵¹

Personally, I’m afraid of suffering and afraid of dying. I’m also afraid of witnessing the suffering and death of those who are close to me. And no doubt I project these fears on those around me and those to come, which makes it impossible for me

48. As [Thomas Metzinger suggests](#) in the field of AI. See also the discussion of Phil Torres on [AI governance](#).

49. See this [docu-commentary on Stanley Kubrick’s classic film, Dr. Strangelove](#). Kierkegaard, cited in the opening, seems to have had an inkling.

50. Elsewhere Luno put it, “Pardon me for having interrupted what, in my arrogance, I judge an eternal expanse of indifference and depravity.”

51. *Empathy* is often contrasted with *sympathy*. The former is a facility for “understanding” another’s suffering, supposing thereby to create or foster a “connection.” Psychiatric theories often leave undefined what “connection” means in this context, without being circular. Perhaps it is an invitation to identify with another, or others, who are not, in that moment, where you are, to stall developments until you can see the world as they do. They seek to exploit your tendency, which they presume you share with them, *to affiliate in order to survive*. It does the group harm that one of its members is considering leaving. It weakens however insignificantly *their resolve to prolong* a project that you can’t bring yourself to be as inspired by as they. Empathy is, in fact, more inherently social than sympathy, which, at best, is a cheaper form of other-regard, often a mere social nicety, degrading to relief that one is not in the same boat as the sufferer – akin to what Benatar calls “comparison”: a device or ploy (a “device” *becomes* a “ploy” upon awareness) to make yourself feel better by observing that others are worse off. Sympathy, thus, if relief is counted a pleasure, is a variety of *schadenfreude* or *epicuricity*.

Imagination, as we use the term here, is the expansion of perception or awareness beyond accepted norms. The expansion, in a moral context, is motivated by runaway empathy and this, in turn, drives the impulse *to take action*: not merely to remark, or even to understand, not to mention indulge a self-serving ploy, but *to do – or not do* – something to end, if not the suffering itself, *awareness* of it. A mercy killing is an example. If we do not kill the other, troubling because it would presume we understand more than we ever can about the other, then, at least, we may kill ourselves – whose inner condition we, if we have reached the limits of lucidity, are in a position to judge. We come to understand that we, at least, even if we may not presume the same for others, do not have what it takes to bear existence, as such, anymore. We kill ourselves with greater surety than we can muster euthanizing another. It is logically possible, despite appearances and the opacity of other minds, that *someone* in this world is, in fact, content with their existence, but you know, at least, that *that* person is not you. And, if you persist despite this awareness, the favor you do them by not dampening their enthusiasm may not be sustainable. When this happens, you become a burden to all – yourself, them, the resources of the universe... There may be cause to lament having evolved this far.

to understand why everyone isn't an antinatalist, just as I have to assume pronatalists can't understand why everyone isn't like them.

– Thomas Ligotti, *Interview*, 2011

Freud, like Nietzsche before him, thought a side effect of civilizational progress is a kind of death wish.⁵²

The thought spelled out is something like this: we will *either*

- become increasingly sensitive to suffering, *or*
- we have already reached the pinnacle of our empathetic possibilities, *i.e.*, we are *now* as nice as we will ever become, *or*
- we revert to reptilian sensibilities.

I will not discuss the second two possibilities since they are ethically less interesting even if true. They tax the imagination less. Ethics will, or soon will, have no application in the worlds they describe. There remains the forward trajectory of human moral development which enforces an *expansion of awareness* of the suffering of sentients *and* a corresponding *augmentation of felt responsibility* for this suffering in those “privileged” to witness it.

We are doomed to see more suffering – *not just because there actually is more suffering, but because we see more of that which was always there with ever increasing clarity and there is no reason to see an upper limit to our capacity to see and to imagine more* – and the subsequent *augmenting intensity of our reaction* will never cease to demand more of us than even our inflated self-assessment can hope to cope with.⁵³

A story like this goes: a young philosopher in *fin de siècle* Vienna walked into the middle of the street to rescue a worm that was surely going to be squashed by traffic.⁵⁴ He brought it to the relative safety of a nearby park. Posthumously, he was diagnosed with depression, having committed suicide a short time after. His name was Otto Weininger,⁵⁵ age 23. Six months before his death in 1903, he had published a book *Geschlecht und Charakter*, translated as *Sex and Character*, in which he argued that we should stop procreation in its tracks. Unlike, say, David Benatar and many others more recently, Weininger did not base his argument on the minification of suffering in the world. His moral psychology was quintessentially Kantian, more Kantian than Kant himself – a “Kant gone mad,” some called him...

There was suffering in the world, if not in the universe, for eons before we were offered the opportunity by our progenitors to *witness* it. We must possess a monumentally inflated sense of importance to think

52. Nietzsche lamented this; Freud tried being clinical about it.

53. Bianco Luno, *leçons en ténèbres*, publication forthcoming.

54. Abrahamsen, David, *The Mind and Death of a Genius*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1946, p. 92.

55. One day, we will have much more to say about [Otto Weininger](#) – one of the most underrated philosophers of the last century. For now, we will just say that up until World War II and the Holocaust, most intellectuals in the world worth their salt knew his name and felt compelled to react to his book. What happened after to explain his “cancellation” is a story more about us than him. Weininger we characterize as one of those “[who walked away from Omelas](#)” (Ursula Le Guin) – understanding but finding intolerable what humans make of their existence. Empathy with the human condition has its limits.

suffering won't survive for eons after our collective remains and artifacts have been reduced to their constituent elements by impersonal, manifestly inhuman, natural forces.⁵⁶

We enter existence as *witnesses* to suffering. This is the best that may be said for our being here. A natural reaction to lessen it – within the constraints our survival imposes – we judge noble and good. But it *behooves* us to make this judgment. The instinct to survive is masterful at self-justification. The conceit, at the top of our generous collection, is that we are a blessing to the universe because of our good intentions or, at least, capacity for them.

It is not enough that there is pain and suffering in the world and enough joy and happiness to help its witnesses eke out excuse to persist witnessing more, but *that there must be witnesses to it at all...* That is a perverse gratuity.⁵⁷

*For our organs of sense, after all, are a kind of instrument.
We can see how useless they would be if they became too sensitive.*⁵⁸

– Erwin Shrodinger

The argument in brief from *supersentience*⁵⁹

Supersentience: the expansion of awareness of the inexorable suffering of others to the point of intolerance for the conditions making possible the awareness.

The expansion becomes sufficient to force action to end awareness of helplessness to relieve it.

Supersentience is the inevitable consequence of advancing moral development, of its deepening and expansion.

The action prescribed by supersentience is the third of three logical possibilities:

1. Metamorphosis
2. Stasis
3. Self-dismissal

Deliberate escape via the first is precluded because it straightforwardly evades moral responsibility: the very thing augmented by supersentience. Reversion to reptilian (in)sensibility or post-human transcendence will be judged ploys to evade responsibility.

The second is inductively implausible. Holding still is not an option, nature seems to show. A status quo is inherently unsustainable.

56. Even if we fail to hurry things along.

57. It will be said that overcoming tribulation builds character and is developmentally salutary. Do whole species have “characters” to edify? The value of character development must lie with the *gracefulness* with which it faces its end. The theory here is that the capacity for imagining and realizing non-existence is as good a point for having existed as any that has ever been concocted – one that fully utilizes the capabilities of the kind of entity in question.

58. *What is Life?*, p.17. The sense organ I have in mind is the moral one.

59. The kernel of this reasoning is due to Otto Weininger.

∴ There remains voluntary extinction from moral overload.

...

To the philosophically-minded on either side, if life has the final say on a matter, we are wasting our time taking philosophy very seriously.⁶⁰ “Truth,” – whether or whatever it is – does not cohere with the instinct to survive. This is not an argument for, or against, anything. I merely point out the strings attached to us.

Appendix 1: afterthoughts

1. Depopulation and climate change

“[Demographic Shifts and Carbon Emissions: Can Population Decline Solve Global Environmental Challenges?](#)” Roos van Keulen at *Earth.org* writes on the possibility that depopulation may help curb climate change.

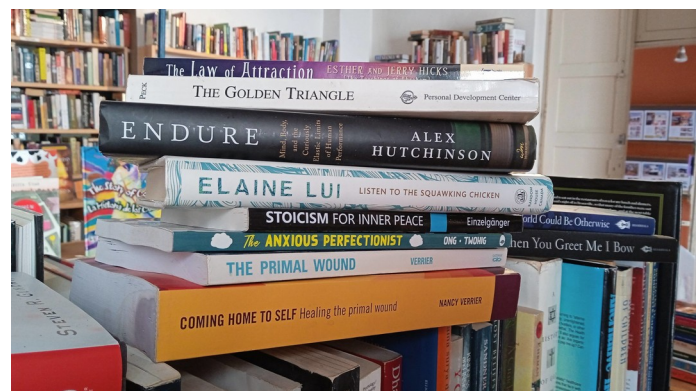
“[The Morality of Having Kids in a Burning, Drowning World.](#)” a review by Jessica Winter, *The New Yorker*, November 20, 2023 of two recent books, *The Quickening* and *The Parenthood Dilemma*, consider the ethics of procreation in the age of man-made climate change.

2. The happiness business

The self-help industry is experiencing [exponential growth](#). Either people suffer terribly... or they are generally happy, but greedy – and want to be happier still. To want to be *happier* implies you are less than fully content *now*. You *could* do better in this regard.

The *need* for guidance and support in coping with being alive was manifest from the beginning of culture. Religion sprouted from it. Today, science and the capabilities it entrains aspires to usurp the role... What is this *need* evidence of?

We must either *enjoy* suffering “slings and arrows” or pessimists, such as Schopenhauer, Benatar, *et al.*, are right: *we are not very happy being alive*. Being dead or unborn is not to be in



60. Philosophy has two ancient traditions which I will call *therapeutic* and *epistemic*. The first seeks insight to help *cope* with existence, the second to *understand* it – *whether or not* consolation falls out of any possible understanding. Consolation derivation may be unavoidable for creatures like us, but the second tradition is keen to know this, whereas the first is prone to suppress it. The second suffers from epistemic arrogance. The first suffers pure and simple: contemplating its misery and how to lessen it is foremost what it deems its cognitive capacity is for.

the running for either suffering or happiness. And those reading this aren't dead or unborn. We are, thus far, in the running willingly.

I am inclined to think we are more than a little masochistic to linger. An evolutionary case could as easily be made for that as for a gene for Pollyannaism. There must be a reason why *both* hilarity and tragedy can elicit tears, people cry at funerals *and* weddings, or why the vocalizations of an orgasm may sound like the torture of the damned.

I am inclined to think we couldn't handle enduring happiness if it bit us. If so, and we revel a little in non-debilitating suffering, and the imaginative and cognitive exercises it generates. It explains our perennially self-sabotaged efforts at melioration. We don't *really* want things to get better on the whole. Nothing has ever prepared us for that eventuality. That would really spell *the* end. The one that matters.

3. The “good” rapist and the “good” progenitor

In reference to the “wrongness” of rape: suppose a *rapist-to-be* believes, not without evidence, that most women want, at some point, in their lives to have children.⁶¹ And this rapist believes, not without reason, that today, in the early part of the 21st Century, socioeconomic and social-psychological pressures, especially in high-income countries, cause many women to put off having children until it is too late for them to have them, subsequently causing them deep and life-long regret, an irreversible harm.⁶² The woman our aspiring rapist has in mind as his victim *wants* to have a child, but *cannot* have one legally because she is underage, and she does *not* want to be forced into sex.⁶³ The rapist believes his contemplated victim, and perhaps society as well, would benefit from having some transient harm inflicted to the autonomous agency of the young woman *now* if it would relieve conditions for many in a world suffering from depopulation *as well as* avoiding this particular young woman's own enduring regret *later*. Is there enough here to *justify* his raping her? By causing her some harm or wrong now, the end result will be better for all, he speculates. He will confer a benefit that will outweigh the relatively short-lived trauma, he calculates, he will inflict. He intervenes thinking he does good, on balance, through rape. (And if she aborts the child, thereby re-asserting her agency, this will be her choice and responsibility, not his. At least, she will have had *the opportunity* to make lemonade from lemons, to slightly paraphrase [Sharron Angle](#).⁶⁴)

61. There is evidence this is becoming less true, but as [this recent article](#) shows the number of women who are *certain* they never want to have children is still far less than the combined total of the uncertain and those certain that they do. Will those numbers reverse so that the number *wanting* to have children is far fewer than those certain they don't or leaning in that direction? The forces pressing on younger women (e.g., those in a position to have) to not have, or have fewer, or delay having children are great and mounting, and appear irreversible (leaving out of consideration demonic coercion schemes as described in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) – with the depopulation consequences noted in [Part 1](#). The value *and* exercise of agency is clearly important and in evidence among younger women. Regret at *never having had* children is obviously a greater worry for older women. For more interesting nuance on this and related questions, see “[Reproductive Regrets among a Population-Based Sample of U.S. Women](#),” Grell, Lowry, *et al.*, *Sage Journals*, 2022.

62. Especially so for educated women, since it is these who were more likely in a position to see motherhood as an earlier path regretfully not taken. Less education correlates with greater passive acceptance. See the [Sage study](#) *supra*.

63. The young woman fears that if she puts off having a child, as most of the women in her milieu have or will, she, like them, will be caught in the mindset that, statistically, has them in its grip: that of *waiting for a better time until it is too late*. The psychological inertia combined with the undeniable wisdom of delay predispose an antinatalist outcome without the moral antinatalist's motives or mental processing. Clumsy extinction does not become our species' pretensions.

64. “In a radio interview Angle did in late June, the Tea Party favorite re-affirmed her pro-life sensibilities (rigid, as they are, even within Republican circles), when she insisted that a young girl raped by her father should know that ‘two wrongs don't make a right.’ Much good can come from a horrific situation like that, Angle added. Lemons can be made into lemonade.” [Huffpost](#), 2010.

This *rapist-to-be* cannot be certain that things will turn out as he predicts... It is not even up to him to make such predictions.

A *would-be parent*, also may hope and even have good reason to predict that both the world *and* their contemplated child will benefit overall by the act of bringing it into the world. How can the would-be parent be certain it will work out as they envision?

There is no consent or endorsement in either case from those primarily affected by the act in question: neither from the rape victim or the child, respectively. That the would-be rapist *might* have gotten consent from his victim, while still remaining a “rapist,” is a *conceptual* impossibility (under legal if not Kantian moral understandings of “rape”).⁶⁵ The label “rapist” is obviated by consent. But the girl is underage and *cannot* give consent; he, the rapist, considerably older.⁶⁶ That the would-be parent *might* have gotten consent from the unborn is a *physical* impossibility. Thus, consent is not part of either picture.

So, *if* the acts are still, to any degree, morally defensible, it must be for other reasons... We will try to expose them.

We do this by sketching a hypothetical scenario suggested by a thought experiment from the famous chapter on “the non-identity problem” in Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*,⁶⁷ then examine it more closely:

1. Suppose a reasonably intelligent 14-year-old girl desperately wants to have a child.
2. Her family and community think this is a bad idea. Moreover, in that community, it would be illegal for her to have a child. Almost any male who got her pregnant would be guilty of the crime of statutory rape.
3. A significantly older man learns of this girl’s wish. He has no special interest in respecting the law. To explain his indifference to the law and clear away distracting considerations, we stipulate he is planning suicide. Foremost among his motives for raping this girl, are these points:
 4. It would be a good thing *for her* if her wish could be gratified, and

65. “...defined as unlawful sexual intercourse with someone without their consent and by means of fear, force, or coercion.” [Legal Information Institute, Cornell School of Law](#).

66. This supposition is to avoid the possibility of a “Romeo and Juliet” defense, available in some jurisdictions, whereby, if the parties are “close in age,” statutory rape charges may not apply.

67. The 14-year-old girl example fits our use case, but is not [how Parfit uses it](#). The fact that she is 14 and that a 14-year-old is not of age to be held *legally* responsible is important to the staging of the hypothetical. It precludes blaming/praising her. It throws the onus on him, the rapist, at least for the violation of her right *not* to be bodily violated (to the extent society grants her this right and doesn’t paternalistically treat her as incapable of agency on the matter) *and* of the arguable right of the unconceived *not* to be conceived. True, the girl desires engagement in an act of child endangerment by *not* having an abortion, but she is too underage to be held accountable. “[T]he criminal offense of child endangerment can be filed when a defendant: Willfully permits or causes a child to be placed in a dangerous situation...” (See this article on [Childhood Endangerment](#) thinking.) *Birth* is one such kind of child endangerment, the implication here is. Children cannot place children in such *legal* jeopardy. (*Morally*, however – as in this case because of the girl’s intelligence and awareness – perhaps, she may be the exception.)

5. the world is depopulating because not enough females capable of child-bearing are deciding to bear children. So *the world* may benefit as well, however minutely.
6. We need not pretend the rapist's motives are exclusively altruistic, but the possibility that the above two considerations loom large in his decision to rape the young woman are not logically inconsistent with more self-serving motives.⁶⁸ He may also see the gratification of the girl's desire to be a mother as something *only* someone such as he, with nothing to lose, is in a position to effect. Adding further to the evidence of his intended "benevolent paternalism" is the consideration that he leaves to her in his will a substantial amount of money to help her and her child navigate the predictable hardships in store for them – ones *he* plans *unilaterally* to saddle them with.
7. He knows that, though the girl dearly wants a child, she does not want to be forced into a sex act. The 14-year-old girl does not want to be raped. She would prefer the act be consensual with a partner chosen by her. The rapist-to-be acknowledges that his intended violation of her autonomy is morally wrong, that is, he recognizes the importance of consent and the wrongness of his violation of her right to deny it, but feels, on *consequentialist* grounds, supported in his decision, nevertheless.
8. Thus, he is well aware of the *morally problematic* nature of his intended act, though utterly unconcerned about its illegality for the reason already cited. His plan is to violate her person in the most egregious way a human female may be violated: after all, his violation is wrong, he admits, quite apart from legal considerations. He need not pretend his act is purely altruistic. He may even think an element of guilt correctly attending his intentions further confirms his predetermined conviction as to the justice of his plans for suicide. Since others will be robbed of the chance to punish him, he will save them the trouble. He may even hope that his act may have some redeeming consequence for the potential young mother and her child, if none for him. He is beyond looking for moral validation. His thinking now is squarely in the realm of aesthetics. He would be content to mitigate a predictable normative dissonance he will leave in his wake. Whatever else may have driven him to disprize his own life, at least this positive morsel may come of one of his last acts.

So the man rapes and impregnates her. He *unilaterally* decides that what matters most is the girl's wish, which cannot be realized legally and in the way she desires, but could still be realized through his act. Given his suicide plans, the illegality and its penal consequences he dismisses summarily. Even if society apprehended⁶⁹ and executed him, this accountability's relevance is preempted. What matters was that this 14 year old girl have her wish gratified – an important one anyway – and that the condition of the world be slightly improved whether anyone but he (along with, he may hope, the girl and her child) appreciates this or not. His act would at least make one young woman happy – *at least*

68. Indeed, this must be a given to block the Kantian insinuation that sexual intercourse is not merely amoral *but actively immoral*. That the operating motives are mixed to some extent obfuscates the immorality of the act. Otherwise, it would be a testament to irredeemable pure animality – the hypocritical facade of human distinctiveness removed, that is, that we do not merely "breed," like animals, but, unlike they, make of the act something morally laudatory.

69. Apparently, it takes less effort than one might imagine, given the ostensible wrongness of rape, to *avoid* prosecution for this crime, placing it down there on the scale of low risk with prosecution for white collar criminality.

eventually, once she got over the trauma of the violation of her wish not to be raped... Or so he wants to imagine.

Given her preference to be a mother, which may be deeper than her investment in her right not to be violated, the young woman chooses to take the child to term. Given the depth of her wish, her rapist speculates, the subsequent joy of motherhood will fade the trauma typically pursuant to rape. Even the likelihood that the girl-mother and her child should experience social, if not material, hardship that might have been avoided had she not been raped and impregnated how and when she was, would not necessarily cause her, or the child, to regret her impregnation and the child's subsequent birth. There might be regret that it happened in the way it did, but again, this regret is outweighed by the happiness the girl experiences being a mother, and the proverbial happiness life is supposed to confer typically on the born. It was always part of the young mother's intent, we are supposing, above all else, to be especially careful to be the best mother she could be to her child. And, we are supposing, she has been given the child and the resources to accomplish this important end for her. *She* has pedestaled the role of mother for herself. Any hardships will only enhance the visceral sense of accomplishment, should she manage her project, more or less, successfully.⁷⁰ Single mothers are *not* doomed to have dysfunctional children, contrary to what may be expected or commonly communicated – not any more than partnered ones.⁷¹

Still, I gather most of us would agree, the rapist is wrong to do what he does independently of what happens – or doesn't – for his victims, the mother and, perhaps, child...

...notwithstanding that, for this young woman and her child, the girl's rape was far from the worst possible thing that might have happened to them – or that typically happens in the lives of very many women and children in similar situations.⁷² Whether or not the society in which they live goes out of its way to express its disapproval of teenage parenthood (as is typically the case in the societies ensconcing most of my readers) *and does something about it*, the lives of the mother and child will still be well worth living post-rape. The hardships of being a mother, at any age, is one of the *least* cited reasons for suicide by women.^{73, 74, 75}

70. Again, we emphasize, motherhood is *her* desideratum: in the case as described, she is fully cognizant of what motherhood entails. *Legally*, she may not be deemed capable of this cognizance. But the approval of others (what legality amounts to) only contingently governs the *morality* of her decision. What is critical to its morality is *her* considered preference. She is, after all, 14 *years*, not 14 *months*, old. Society has its reasons, good or bad, for formally disqualifying her considered judgment on such matters. The judgments may, nevertheless, still be *hers* and *considered*... Nothing magically infuses a measure of wisdom into a young woman at 16, altering the normative color of her decisions. In case it needs to be said, we are *not* defending rape, let alone the rape of underage girls. We are suggesting that the scenario, as described, closely analogizes with the situation of a thoughtful progenitor. We take it, that will not count as a defense.

71. Count [the number of presidents](#) of the United States who were raised by single-parents (usually, mothers). There is no pattern to suggest that these were the worst of the roster. And consider June Stephenson's study concluding that males raised in two-parent families are distinguished as to their propensity for criminality *only* by the *class* of crime they commit, not by mere criminal tendency: more street criminals come from single-parent households while most white collar criminals come from [two-parent ones](#) – *and the latter cost society more than the former by a factor of 18*. (See also "[The Cost of White-collar crime](#)," Mark A. Cohen and our writeup, "[Boys kill](#).")...

72. The number of reported, not to count *actual*, [rapes is staggering](#). The likelihood that a female will be raped at some point in her life is one in four, conservatively. Most *reported* rapes are never properly charged or penalized, and the number of conjectured *actual* rapes lends support to Luno's infamous claim that "the world is populated by rapists." (Though Luno's claim is rooted in an understanding of what it means to respect rational autonomy absolutely in the Kantian sense, not in a more common instrumental sense in which people treat rational autonomy as an accessory to socially acceptable behavior. Hence, empirical considerations for his claim are an afterthought.)

But to return to the purpose of engineering this hypothetical case, let's concisely characterize our "semi-altruistic" rapist. He manifests:

1. A *unilateral* decision –
2. justified by the impossibility of acquiring consent (the law precludes it explicitly because of her minority; her relative innocence precludes it morally, though less sharply).
3. The presence of other-regarding intentions without
4. denying an element of self-interest.⁷⁶
5. A dedication to optimize for possible good,
6. together with an admission of the possibility, if not likelihood, of harm,

73. Leaving aside pathologies such as *postpartum depression*. Such biological dysfunctions, as higher rates of psychopathy in males, are adiaphorous. (But [recent research](#) suggests that psychopathy in females manifests differently, and when this is taken into account, earlier assessments of a vast difference in its prevalence between the sexes is substantially diminished.)

74. None of this is to deny what "British psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff writes of women bearing children conceived in rape, 'The woman feels she has growing inside her part of a hateful or distasteful Other. Unless this feeling can be resolved, the foetus who takes on these characteristics is liable to remain an internal foreigner, barely tolerated or in constant danger of expulsion, and the baby will emerge part-stranger, likely to be ostracized or punished.' One rape survivor, in testimony before the Louisiana Senate Committee on Health and Welfare, described her son as 'a living, breathing torture mechanism that replayed in my mind over and over the rape.' Another woman described having a rape-conceived son as 'entrapment beyond description' and felt 'the child was cursed from birth'; the child ultimately had severe psychological challenges and was removed from the family by social services concerned about his mental well-being. One of the women I interviewed said, 'While most mothers just go with their natural instincts, my instincts are horrifying. It's a constant, conscious effort that my instincts not take over.'" (quoted here from [The New Yorker article by Andrew Solomon](#)).

The pressure to "resolve" the feeling is great. The inability to always accomplish a resolution is an equally formidable concern. Moreover, *is there a moral duty to resolve it? To sacrifice one's rightful autonomy to further consequences brought on through the violation of it by another?* Kant, interestingly, acknowledged those "horrifying" instincts – though he wouldn't have called them "instincts" rather "rights" tightly connected with *the kind of being with autonomous agency* a mother is or is capable of being. He [defended infanticide](#) (and, perforce, abortion) *by a mother* if her honor was at stake, something only *she* can truly be judge of. This was one of only two forms of willful killing he excluded from capital consequences (the other being killing in a proper duel by a man, "proper" meaning resulting from a genuine violation of honor and according to a disciplined protocol). Understood is that there is a conception of honor *peculiar to each sex*. They are different. There is no corresponding circumstance in which a father has a *right* to kill his offspring... To quote again from the Solomon article, "There can be no question that, for some women, an abortion would be far more traumatic than having a rape-conceived child." It is *in this forced choice* that Kant finds reason to excuse infanticide/abortion: it is *not* that killing fetuses or infants is right, it is that the situation the mother has been placed in is punishment enough for the wrongness of the destruction of the fetus or infant, *if* killing in this circumstance is even wrong. It is a *tragic* situation for her. She may suffer *either way* through no fault of hers. The unjustified killing of actual or potential rationally autonomous beings is the greatest of crimes humans are capable of, for which the ultimate punishment is called for, says Kant. But *potential* and *actual* rational autonomy are *not* equally valuable (as [Mary Anne Warren argued](#) early on in the context of the abortion debate). The mother is *actually* capable of rational autonomy; the fetus/infant, not yet or perhaps ever...

In carving out an exception for a woman, essentially granting her, in her role as mother, a "license to kill," I have to believe Kant must have had in mind scenes like this: "He was a healthy little boy and Mirveta had produced him. But birth, the fifth in her short lifetime, had not brought joy, only dread. As he was pulled from her loins, as the nurses at Kosovo's British-administered university hospital handed her the baby, as the young Albanian mother took the child, she prepared to do the deed. She cradled him to her chest, she looked into her boy's eyes, she stroked his face and she snapped his neck. They say it was a fairly clean business. Mirveta had used her bare hands. It is said that, in tears, she handed her baby back to the nurses, holding his snapped, limp neck. In Pristina, in her psychiatric detention cell, she has been weeping ever since." Reported by Helena Smith, "[Rape victims' babies pay the price of war](#)," *The Guardian*, 2020. (Again, I owe this reference to [the Solomon article](#).) In connection with the existential right to abort or to kill one's infant, exclusive to a mother, see also our discussion of Rosalind Hursthouse in [our writeup on abortion](#).

75. If it wasn't Joseph, then it was either God or a [Roman soldier](#). If not Joseph, Mary was raped, immaculately or in the usual way, and, though she was partnered and didn't raise him alone, her son did well as a mover and shaker in world

7. but rationalized via a *calculation* that the former outweighs the latter, and
8. buttressed by a basic, but auxiliary and seldom argued, conviction that one does good by conferring the opportunity for happiness on another at whatever cost.⁷⁷

Everything on this list is as true of a *stereotypical parent* as of our *hypothetical rapist*.

Missing from this list of the contents of the rapist's thoughts is the conviction (defended by Shiffrin) that deciding *unilaterally* on behalf of another in nontrivial matters is fundamentally wrong. *If* such unilateral decisions are *wrong*, this is what makes *both* rape *and* procreating *unconditionally* wrong as well.

The *unilateral* decision at the start is the core fault according to Shiffrin. Does the calculation at consideration 7 work to salvage moral acceptability? Singh argues it does not: if he does so successfully, this opens a way to suggest that rape and procreation are morally on a par. (The rape analogy is mine. It is not found in Shiffrin or Singh.)

Objection 1: offensive comparison

The suggestion that normal procreation is in anyway like the behavior of a rapist is offensive. The intentions of procreators-to-be are nothing like the utter disregard a rapist has for the well-being of his victim(s). The hypothetical case is contrived to show that it could be.

Response:

That the intentional procreation act and the violation of his victim's autonomy by a rapist are nothing like each other is presumed in order to drive home the point that in *morally relevant* ways they, nevertheless, *are*. True, the *typical* rapist does not engage with considerations 1-8 to rationalize his act, but neither does the *typical* progenitor-to-be. (It would be an extraordinary rapist who did, *and* it would be an extraordinary progenitor-to-be who did.)

But they, the typical rapist *and* the typical progenitor-to-be, *are* alike in that *both*, the rapist and progenitor-to-be, disregard *the first and paramount consideration*: the gravity of a unilateral decision to carry through with an act with serious consequences⁷⁸ – as serious as any we may imagine – for another human being. In the case of the rapist: *he* is deciding how to weigh (if he bothers to weigh anything) the life-altering physical, mental, and, often, material trauma to his victim against benefits of the act for *him* or even *his imagined posit* of the benefits his victim and the world may enjoy. It is *factually* untrue that no one ever benefits from an act of rape.

history.

76. Whether it is sex he seeks to extract from her or it is the rush of control over her being and body, as some prefer to describe rape, the presence of either is not logically obviated in the situation as described, nor do these obviate the supposed co-presence of altruistic motives. The sex-act is *motivationally* the most compromised, *i.e.*, morally ambiguous, act between birth and death. Birth and death, indeed, are not *acts* at all but *events*. This explain why we don't, like dogs, do it on the street, but abscond.

77. Here it is a bald, non-consequentialist, felt-by-many, pronatalist conviction that more opportunities for life are good because "life is good," full stop. Our rapist, suicidal, as he is, need not be antinatalist as well.

78. "Consequences," here, compasses vastly more than the material: foremost is the impugnation of the victim's humanity to the extent we, hypocritically or not, persist in pedestalizing it.

People get born that way everyday whose lives are not utter wastes and their mothers are not always utterly destroyed. But the point here is that these consequences are irrelevant to the moral valence of the rape. *The moral damage here is done at conception – not in the act of fertilizing her ovum by his sperm (and all that may follow) but at the point the idea of a unilateral decision on the matter enters his mind.* The wrongness of rape consists in the violation of the victim's right to be consulted and to refuse. It is true – by the definition of rape as forced sex with likely consequences for its victim – that these consequences, even if they include benefits, are *not* desired by the victim. The rapist is *unilaterally* deciding the course of life for another. The parent is *unilaterally* deciding the essential condition for *any* course of life to happen.⁷⁹ *If* this is offensive, it *should* be. At the very least, it ought to provoke careful thinking about the moral status of procreation.

Objection 2: wasteful mincing

The comparison, as described in the hypothetical, presumes the sacredness of respecting rational autonomy in the Kantian sense. If this principle is not the be-all-and-end-all of moral foundations, the force of the argument is weakened. Consequentialist considerations, for example, weaken the comparison. Consequentially, the results of intentional parenting/procreating are not, generally, as morally pernicious (*i.e.*, damaging to general well-being, either of the mother, the child or the community) as the typical consequences of rape. The lives of rape victims and resulting pregnancies, whether ending in abortion or in disadvantaged children, are consequentially bad to a greater degree than those of intentional parenting/procreating.

No matter the motivation of any of the parties, this is a fact, and it is why it is a kind of category mistake to compare them in this way. Hence, the argument in the hypothetical case does not show that intentional parenting/procreating requires the kind of abstruse and extraordinary scrutiny and justification suggested. It is more constructive to accept *as a rule* that, *generally*, good things result from intentional parenting/procreating and that, *generally*, bad ones from rape. More mincing discrimination about motivations and intentions than this is uncalled for.

Until we discover that following this rule has bad overall results for the greatest number of beings sensitive to considerations of well-being, there is no case against procreation in general made by comparing rape and intentional parenting/procreating.

In real life, it is *not* a good idea to examine too closely the specific intentions or motives of any moral actor, *even if* these could be discerned with the accuracy presumed in the description of the hypothetical altruistic/paternalistic rapist. Expected consequences, because inductively supported, generally, offer better guidance on matters of rightness and wrongness.

Response:

If it is a fact that a capacity for increasing sophistication in the moral discriminations we are compelled to make is in progress, then the “mincing” is and will be increasingly unavoidable. A

79. The possibility, though aberrant and rare, the rape victim comes to enjoy her subjection and moral degradation, endorses it, converts it into *consensual sex in medias res*, and the wrongness mitigated or obviated thereby – is not even remotely present in the case of the unborn. Such a bilateral consensus between the unborn and procreator is not even possible as it may well be in a sex act between procreators.

prognosis is that an ever-augmenting empathetic imagination will force one or another path to extinction of consciousness as we know it. This will entail a negative evaluation of existence – again, *as we know it*.

The consequentialist/utilitarian rule assumes a *static* understanding of how we evaluate good and bad states of affairs. This assumption is problematic for any conception of species-wide moral development. The stasis assumption is challenged in the *third* path to extinction *supra*: “Self-excusals.” If there are, or will be, *other* conceptions of “survival” – *not* “as we know it” – in which exclusively consequences are decisive,⁸⁰ these, too, are covered by the label “extinction,” as we define it, because they play fast and loose with capacities for moral identification across unbounded change. We make a case for defining it this way in the *first* path to extinction above.

4. Life as a mindless process

The purpose of peace is to prepare for war. And the reason peace ever happens is because war is exhausting.

– Bianco Luno
leçons en ténèbres, publication forthcoming.

Supposing such cynical remarks are even halfway true of the world, why would you want to create more witnesses to it?

Because perhaps we are compelled to by some genetic configuration bent on initiating and tending certain processes – *our lives* – for a spell and these processes require an ambivalence toward experience: something like a gene for masochism – for finding, even seeking, pleasure in pain. Given the mix of these, experientially immanent as it is, such programming would be survival-fitting.

But toying with the extinction-baiting characteristic of life since the beginning requires a precarious balance. Tempting the world to dismiss life, no intentionality in sight, in the fullness of time, is bound to get results...

Good? Bad?

5. “As necessary”?

...for indeed both are good in their own natures: procreation of children is as necessary as that finding out of truth, ...

– Ficinus⁸¹
(as quoted in [The Anatomy of Melancholy](#) (1652), Robert Burton, Third Partition, First Section, Member Subsection, Subject II “[Love-Melancholy And Religious Melancholy](#)”)

“Truth-seeking” is a magnet for lip service. Practically, for as long as it can, life pulls the strings. There is no fair contest between truth and life. It is a wonder any notion of truth, apart what is life-serving, ever dawns upon us. What we must mean by the term is that there is another story suiting our aims

80. E.g., “[foreverism](#)”: post- or transhumanism or long-termism.

81. Aka, [Marsilio Ficino](#).

better that we must find or concoct. When the ployiness of the situation lodges itself in consciousness, we are on the way out... But on pain of self-deception we cannot conclude more. We only remark.

Having never existed, we would never have discovered its extravagance.

– Bianco Luno
leçons en ténèbres, publication forthcoming.

6. The plan

What is the plan? For us? *Collectively*? Do we have one? Religions supply them, but does scientific humanism? We know what happens to us individually. We die. Is there evidence that it is different for *the lot of us*? This is why it is difficult to dispose of religion as easily as some atheists pretend to. Alternatively, we can always pretend we are just animals, faking humility thereby. But unlike mere animals we have to *fake* it. It is the very capacity for awareness that enforces the fakery.

The problem with conceding *there is no plan* is that the suggestion has no normative force. If planlessness is an accurate description of the situation (whatever “accuracy” could mean in that case), you cannot accuse me of having illusions, should I pretend otherwise, that you, with your insistence, do not have also.

The problem with insisting on a plan is the *insistence*.

A quietism – not from humility but from exhaustion – is all that is left.

Appendix 2: presentation outline for Part 2

Topics: antinatalism, pronatalism, and extinction

Shriffin/Singh: *anti*

the obligation to *consult* those affected in non-trivial ways by our decisions

the impossibility of doing this for the not-yet-born

hence, the *morally problematic* character of bringing humans into the world

1. the possibility of *inferring* endorsement from those affected but *not* in a position to be consulted
2. the obstacles in the way of such inferences
3. the radical difference between
 - being happy to be alive and
 - being happy to have been born.

Smyth: the missing *existential grounding* of the debate

Do the theoretical arguments of philosophers have anything to say to a person contemplating bringing a life into the world?

Are the philosopher's arguments too abstract and removed from the reality of *all-too-human/all-too-animal* impulses?

Why should purely rational considerations have authority over practical decisions on such matters that give *purpose and meaning* to people's lives?

To insist or not to insist: building on – while countering – Smyth's premise: suicide or "insistence existence," "the personal is existential," "the view from here matters..." We raise the question:

Why should we submit to the importance of *aggregated suffering* – as pedestalized by utilitarian considerations, for example?

I.

If it's *aggregated* suffering that trumps all in terms of significance, why is individual *suicide* not, then, the height of moral virtue? Since the evolving consciousness of my presence will contribute more of a resource burden than it adds to the alleviation of collective suffering. The argument goes:

1. Given that I came to be *not* as part of a program to optimize happiness in the world, and
2. given that I was certainly not consulted on the matter, and,
3. even if I am reasonably happy to exist,
4. while existence itself, through the epistemic opportunities it has offered me, has educated me on my inexorable *insignificance*, then,
5. assuming I am rational and well-meaning,
6. why can I not formulate a principle of harm/wrong mitigation and correct the crime of coming into existence, a crime perpetrated – not so much on *me* (since, *ex hypothesi*, I am virtually gratuitous), but on the collective, comprised of mostly others, to which I belong? I can't undo the past but a mid-course correction seems possible and honorable: "Pardon me, but I now realize my being here was a mistake. I will excuse myself." Like walking into a restroom of the wrong gender. To insist there was no mistake seems disingenuous and callous. *The least* I should do, I think, is to excuse myself as quickly as possible after realizing the mistake.

II.

Alternatively, I may shake my fist and assert my presence here is an undeserved gift to the universe: I *matter* because of my unique and exceptional nature: I can *insist*, I can create importance out of thin air. I insist *therefore* I am. (Not in virtue of an epistemic whim, as suggested by Descartes.) And any effort on the part of my natural or social environment to devalue my self-esteem is a force to be resisted. Indeed, continuous rebellion against any such submission constitutes my very dignity and worth. I will lose, of course, in the end – no need to delude myself about that: the magnitude of the forces arrayed against me insures as much. But given the opportunity of being a locus of self-legislative autonomy (a privilege which I never asked for since the decision behind the bestowal was never mine), that's what I will do: *I will go down kicking and screaming*

my significance. This was not a fight I asked for, but I will be damned if I am not *true to the vision my capabilities prepared me for*.

III.

Existential meekness is another possibility. Shut up, don't rock the boat. The bystander experience... Again, I never asked for any of this, but here I am. I will applaud and heckle what those around me do. And, insouciant, follow the script I was handed, and bide my time until the show is over.

...

Needless to say, *personal* "insistence existence" scales easily to the *species* level. All together now... What will it be? Self-dismissal, conquest of the universe, or more of the same until the whim passes?

The depopulation problem summed up

1. Youth and innovation, a "tech" solution?

But:

- a. Youth becomes scarcer as aging balloons;
- b. creativity, innovation, the risk-taking associated with the generation of new ideas is a young person's prerogative and luxury;
- c. while risk aversion, conservatism, sticking to what has worked in the past, etc. are traits associated with age (time to correct or learn from mistakes is, for these, too dear);
- d. there is no history of these tendencies being otherwise;
- e. thus, "thinking outside the box" will exponentially diminish while, at the same time, more will be exponentially required.

2. Unprecedented: we have no history or prehistory to guide us on what to do. Shall we entertain morally questionable tactics such as:

- a. conscript women into baby manufacturing (as in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*), or
- b. enjoin programs of involuntary euthanasia for old people, or, more humanely, get them to realize a moral duty to see the cost *ineffectiveness* of their persistence and to voluntarily opt for shuffling off their mortal coil, or
- c. some combination of a. or b.?

3. There seem to be hard times ahead no matter what. But has there *ever* been a time when this was not true? Perhaps, we have always had the possibility of ignoring the long term; but now the endgame is looming and we are not as equipped to look the other way as we once were. Perhaps, we should, then, accept one of following:

- a. the path to outright extinction, or

b. shoot for a sustainable but large reduction in our numbers *though not to the point of absence* (as suggested by Jason Anthony, among many). Can we do that? Have we any history to suggest we have ever achieved “sustainability” in regard to anything? (In other words, “to sustain” implies *temporarily*. We don’t do non-anthropoc permanence.) Moreover, there are all kinds of forces at work in demography whose complex interaction we can hardly fathom: biological, sociological, psychological, economic, political, and philosophical forces which, in the past, have sometimes pushed against each other, allowing us to hide behind unclarity... But are we now witnessing their alignment in one direction? Nothing in nature suggests species immortality. A lot of cultural and civilizational imperatives suggest moral qualms with the idea as well. When nature and culture *align* our goose cooks.

4. Three possible reactions:

- a. The antinatalists suggest we bite the bullet: accept the finite pain involved in the transition to extinction in the interest of preempting the vast predictable and preventable suffering if we don’t.
- b. The anti-pronatalists (excluding the antinatalists) assert we live indefinitely with a measured but sustainable modicum of suffering.
- c. The pronatalists simply accept suffering as a condition of existence and recognize no stronger imperative than that. As it is with all other life, so with us. We will keep doing what we do until we stop or something stops us. But whether to be or not to be – the impulse either way, whether to have one or the other – is not a choice for us. Pain and suffering are afterthoughts; their minification is not our principle business here.

Each of these positions may be rationally defended... That is the problem.

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*Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
The Philosophy Club in July 2024
Accessible at Archive.org*

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle